

**ECOLOGIES OF THE GOOD LIFE:
FORCES, BODIES, AND CROSS-CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS**

by
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ABSTRACT

How do political responses to ecological problems shift once we take seriously the powers of natural forces to alter collective conditions and identities? What if the land was understood to be a co-creator of social life, and not simply an economic resource or material context for human action? Would not what counts as economy also change? This dissertation addresses these questions by examining pivotal thinkers in Western political thought, including Thoreau, Nietzsche, and Deleuze, in relation to the life-world of the Gurensi people of Ghana. It also explores the vital role that work in the visual arts and architecture can play in enhancing our sensitivities and forging negotiations between Western and African thought. The comparative project uses a blend of interpretive and ethnographic methods. It highlights interdependencies between human identities and natural processes and connects environmental political theory to a set of already existing sustainable practices and African knowledges.

Readers:

Jane Bennett
William Connolly
Siba Grovogui
Sara Berry
Naveeda Khan

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Political Theory and the Cross-Cultural Encounter

Summer 2012

In the smoldering heat of the afternoon sun, I walked slowly down the narrow footpath winding through fields of overgrown guinea corn. I was on my way to Gowrie to meet Christopher Anabila Azaare. Like many African elders, Christopher Azaare was renowned for his command of a rich body of traditional knowledge. I arrived just in time to catch the tail end of a house tour Chris was giving to three European visitors, including a German NGO volunteer at a nearby school. Chris was dressed in navy gray, muddy sweat-shorts and a blue shirt that was discolored by the sun. He walked with a noticeable limp from an old injury. While showing me around the house, he would occasionally burst into hearty and enthusiastic laughter that interspersed his engaging stories and teachings. Chris introduced himself as a retired schoolteacher who was still teaching part-time in two local schools and serving in the Parent-Teacher Association. It soon became apparent, however, that he was a man of multiple talents: Chris was also a well-known public intellectual, a trained meteorologist, a professional soccer referee, a long-term custodian of his family gods, a sculptor, a devoted reader, a prolific writer, and a researcher. Since 1976 Chris Azaare has been recording the histories, genealogies, technologies, and socio-cultural practices of the Gurensi and Boosi people of the Upper East region of Ghana.¹ Chris sleeps very little and sometimes writes until 3:30 a.m., staying awake with kola nuts, coffee, and Milo. He has crafted elaborate genealogical maps of whole villages and clans. His old, dusty desk is covered with piles of multi-volume, handwritten manuscripts on topics such as Gurensi pregnancy and birth, totemic

animals and taboos, village and clan histories, as well as a number of studies of Gurensi oral traditions.



Writer and sculptor Chris Azaare



Chris Azaare's museum in Gowrie

For years Chris Azaare has been building the house where we met with the idea of turning it into a museum of Gurensi history and culture. He has created beautiful cement sculptures scattered around the maze of rooms and courtyards. These include a life-size installation of his mother; a *tindaana* (earth custodian) performing a sacrifice to the *tingane* (earth gods); a senior wife cooking the family meal; and an elderly woman smoking a “peace pipe.” Others represent savanna animals such as lions and birds. The museum includes a miniature Gurensi earthen compound built out of a mix of local and imported materials. The mud and grass for the house come directly from the pit and grass fields adjacent to the house. The walls are plastered with cement. Chris looks particularly eager to show me the *denya’anya*, the flat-roofed female room found in every Gurensi compound: “*Nya’anya* means ‘female.’ *Deo* means ‘room.’ But *deo* can be used in several contexts. We are from one family, one house—that is *deo*...If you are the landlord or the landlady, when you die you get sent into that room. If a woman is performing birth rites

[and] delivers, she is sent to that room, the *denya'anya*. It is the sacred room of the house, the room that is never let out in building.”² As Chris and I visited house after house during our subsequent research trips, I realized that a compound is more than a material structure or a set of facilities: it grows and changes in accordance with the rhythms and lifecycles of the earth, the weather, and those who reside within its confines. It is a living body that intertwines the lifecycles of the living, the unborn, and the dead into a web of interdependences.

According to Chris Azaare, it is such interdependencies that make one’s house or village a home. Social identities are shaped by people’s rootedness in the ancestral land (*tiŋa*) and their connections to sacred localities and shrines (*tingana*), to totemic animals and trees, and to preceding generations:

I am called Azaare...I was named after my dead father. In certain situations they would not call me by Azaare, they would say *yaaba* [ancestor]...The people of Zaare, they worship, the whole community worships one god: Azaare...the Azaare is the big baba tree...it is not an ordinary tree you are named after. It is your ancestor that is in it and that is how your name is derived. So you do not allow anyone to cut the branches or the roots or whatnot. So those trees are usually guarded heavily...You are named after the *tingane*. And your *tingane* is the inhabiting place for your ancestor or your grandfather...There are other trees—you see the bats that gather, the doves coming to inhabit in those things—it is your ancestor, it is your *yaaba* that is inhabiting those...you cannot just go and cut. *Because that is your life*. That’s why I said the earth is just like a womb. All people are buried in it...we are all buried just like a child is in the mother’s womb...And the earth (*tiŋa*) is delicate because it is like the womb of the woman...it is very thin and can get damaged.³

Like Chris Azaare, many people identify themselves with *tingana*, the abodes of the *yaabas* (deceased elders or ancestors) of Northern Ghanaian communities who return to live with their living kin as baobab trees, pythons, or sacred groves. The oldest abode of the ancestors is the earth (*tiŋa*), and the womb of the *tiŋa* is where the farmer sows his seed and the dead are buried. It is also the life-generating force that gives birth both to new *tingana* and children who will bear *tingana*’s names, ensuring enduring ancestral

presences within and across human and natural bodies and the earth. To cut the branches of a *tingane* or build a quarry that punctures the delicate skin of the earth means extinguishing one's vibrant source of life, history, and identity. Socio-cultural life is not separate from but interdependent with and transfused by ecological processes and forces of degradation and renewal of the earth.

In a world of rapid ecological change—where the communion between people, ancestors, and nature is becoming increasingly fragile—it seems particularly important to bring to light such existing forms of indigenous ecological thought and lived experience. These practices extend human subjectivity and experience deep into the natural world. They reveal modalities of human-environment interactions that do not fit easily into the living/non-living and nature/culture divisions that organize much of our contemporary political thinking. My discussions and travels with Chris Azaare in Ghana have had a profound influence on my work as a political theorist, perhaps enhancing my sense of belonging to the earth. By sharing my ethnographic observations in the pages to follow, it is my hope that you, the reader, may too become more alert to the various interdependencies between humans and nature. Together we may follow the advice of the elders to tread softly on the earth.

Spring 1845

“Near the end of March, 1845, I borrowed an axe and went down to the woods by Walden Pond, nearest to where I intended to build my house, and began to cut down some tall arrowy white pines, still in their youth, for timber. It is difficult to begin without borrowing.”⁴ Henry David Thoreau's move to Walden Pond was an experiment,

a new beginning. The pond covered sixty-one acres of a densely wooded area south and just a little east of Concord, Massachusetts, bounded by the railroad at one end and Walden Road at the other. Thoreau's stay at the pond was a remarkably productive experience. Besides twelve bushels of beans and eighteen bushels of potatoes, he produced more writings of exceptional quality than at any other period of his life. In two years and two months he wrote two full drafts of *Week*, a complete draft of *Walden*, two lectures, and the "Ktaadn" essay in *The Maine Woods*.⁵

Like Chris Azaare, Thoreau was not only a prolific writer and house-builder but also a sculptor of a nonconformist, earth-bound body. The Walden experiment is not a retreat from society but a process of ethical self-formation and awakening to what is important in socio-cultural life: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."⁶ Thoreau questions the competitive tendencies of American society, the industrial mode of production, and the waste and extravagance in shelter, clothing, and food. Walden is an experiment in small-scale micropolitical reformation, reduced to the simplest constituent unit, the self.⁷ Thoreau is aware that the self is a socio-cultural construct, with layerings that become sedimented into bodily dispositions, political sensibilities, and institutional commitments. And, this construct often exceeds the powers of control of its architects. Bodies are composed of materials that have a vitality of their own: "Every man is the builder of a temple, called his body, to the god he worships, after a style purely his own, nor can he get off by hammering marble instead. We are all sculptors and painters, and our material is our own flesh and blood and bones."⁸ Thoreau is a sculptor who works

with versatile media: flesh, blood, bones, memories, rocks, sounds, imagination, scripture, canoes, words, twigs, and constellations. His sculpture is a self-fashioning and responsive body whose limits, interior or exterior, are ambiguous and extensive. This body no longer serves to center or stabilize an exclusively human image. Any encounter with natural forces such as climate and mountain air can enliven the self and extend it into natural forces and processes: “For I believe that climate does thus react on man,—as there is something in the mountain air that feeds the spirit and inspires. Will not man grow to greater perfection intellectually as well as physically under these influences?”⁹ This transformative relationship with earthly forces is at the same time a relationship with oneself: “Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? *Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?*”¹⁰ Thoreau sensitizes his body to its own constitution as partly earth. The power of his body to affect other bodies involves a corresponding capacity to be affected or to respond to the vitality that runs through all earthly existence.

In searching for an answer to the question of how one should live one’s life, both Henry Thoreau and Chris Azaare turn to the earth, rather than to the state or a central authority. While Thoreau refuses to identify the good life with God or society, for Chris Azaare, the pivotal role of the ancestors and the gods in society’s well-being can only be known through the earth. However, for both writers, nature expresses and makes thinkable the variations and undulations of the underlying laws of the world.¹¹ They seem to concur that sensitivity and practical, lived experience are related modes of thinking that offer a counterpoint to abstract ways of theorizing. Thinking should follow and grow out of the lived experiences of the relationships between people and the earth. This intuition makes Chris Azaare and Henry Thoreau ethnographers of socio-ecological

change who illuminate the complex relationship between transnational processes and individual lives. The Walden experiment chronicled everyday life in Concord during a time when the influence of land speculators and big agribusiness was growing, undermining the Jeffersonian ideal of subsistence farming.¹² Thoreau's systematic record of when and where plants flowered in Concord allows researchers today to discern patterns of plant abundance and decline in the area—and by extension in New England—and to link those patterns to climate change.¹³ Chris Azaare's oral histories of "heavily guarded" *tingana*, in turn, provide a living record of pre-colonial biodiversity and primary forest cover that enables us to register increasing rates of deforestation and desertification in Northern Ghana. He describes transforming ramifications between subsistence farmers and a life-generating earth that today compete with Western-inspired forms of land management and ownership. In both cases, the business of the scholar is to study nature and to know himself, and these two tasks may even turn out to be the same thing.¹⁴

This dissertation explores how contemporary political responses to ecological problems would shift if land were to be understood as a co-creator of social life and not only an economic resource. This concern with living well without undermining the natural systems on which we depend is the impetus for my research. It is based on the observation that environmentalists and political economists have neglected the centrality of lived experience to ecological imaginaries of the good life. The dissertation seeks to remedy this gap: I stage encounters between pivotal, albeit minor (with regard to the canon), texts in Western political thought, such as those of Thoreau, Nietzsche, and

Deleuze and Guattari, and the life-world of the Gurensi people of Ghana. The comparative project uses a blend of interpretive and ethnographic methods. It views natural processes and ecological problems as intertwined with social practices of identity formation. I complement textual analysis with ethnographic methods to render visible within the orbit of political theory a long tradition of environmental thought in Africa.

My fieldwork in Ghana was conducted during two trips that took place between December 2011 and January 2012 and from July 2012 to January 2013. My focus on the Gurensi institution of earth custody (*tindaanaship*) and its encounters with the market economy highlights alternative ways of structuring the relations between what are often seen as distinct spheres of the “economic,” the “ecological,” and the “cultural.” Such alternatives, I argue, do not only deepen philosophical analyses of interdependencies between collective identities and natural forces; they also enrich scholarly understanding of how environmental thought becomes anchored in, rather than abstracted from, the diversity of lived experiences in a scaled-up, globalizing world. I show how people draw upon such interdependencies to “model” their own economies and modalities of property and production. Localities such as Northern Ghana—commonly defined as insufficiently developed or modernized—might now be acknowledged as sites of surplus possibility and alternative ecological imaginaries. By including oral histories and story-telling as ways of practicing economics that contrast with quantitative approaches, I also aim to reassess the analytical resources available for the study and teaching of political economy.

The project advances both multi-economism and multi-culturalism in the study of global politics. It addresses the tendencies to treat indigenous perspectives on land,

property, and wealth as beliefs rather than as methods for ascertaining truth (which is typically reserved for Western political economy). These latter tendencies create profound inequalities concerning who is (and is not) authorized to produce knowledge about globalization and the environment, and therefore, profoundly affect how global environmental changes come to be understood and addressed.

Questions concerning the survivability of species and the integrity of natural processes cross both national and disciplinary boundaries. By linking ethnography to a series of pressing philosophical debates about economy, nature, ethics, and politics, however, I also aim to negotiate the tension between “global” and “local” that characterizes much of the work in environmental studies and international political economy. I explore practices of sustainable living that are already at work in specific geographical regions (the U.S. and Ghana), but do so in the context of broad, philosophical concerns about the health of the planet. A focus on consumption brings to light geographical and cultural distances between consumers and the ecological consequences of their consumption practices. This consumption lens connects my research to the major contemporary debates about sustainability: What constitutes sustainable consumption practices? What is being sustained: development itself or the integrity of ecosystems and livelihoods? My ethnography of the Gurensi people’s relationship to the land furnishes chronicles of lived experience that complicate both the technocratic and the holistic understandings that alternate in this debate.¹⁵

ECOLOGY, ECONOMY, AND ART

I start with the intuition that philosophical reflection profits from being combined with ethnography. By exposing philosophical ideas about nature, community, and economy to ethnographies that reveal ecological and cultural difference, I aim to forge a new dialogue between Euro-American political thought and African lived experience. I am not saying that ethnography provides the base to which Western philosophy must be anchored. I am exploring a two-way street in which a “minor” literature in Euro-American traditions and the thought of the Gurensi can inform one another. The former minor movement in Euro-American thought is embodied by Thoreau and Nietzsche, who each challenge the majority culture in their renderings of ecology, the Wild, pan-perspectivism, and gratitude for the abundance of being. Gurensi thought can be also understood as a minor literature as it tries to push back against a modernizing culture, which shares with the West a model of economy that I challenge in chapter 2. The idea is not to place a minor tradition into relation to a major one, but to explore what happens when two minor traditions are put into communication with one another. Perhaps, this puts even more pressure on the major traditions in each place. The mutuality of such cross-cultural encounters may transform both Western and African perspectives and diversify the available resources for contemporary environmental action.

The goal is to cultivate an ecological sensibility capable of closer discernment of the interconnectedness of living and non-living creatures and a more subtle awareness of the presence of multiple degrees of agency and creativity, distributed along a continuum of human, earthen, and other nonhuman bodies and forces. This task can be situated

within recent trends in political theory that challenge understandings of politics as an exclusively human domain, both by taking account of the body as a relay point for ecopolitical mobilization and by re-thinking political contestation as including influences from nonhuman bodies. Contemporary thinkers such as Jane Bennett, William Connolly, Karen Barad, Bruno Latour, Diana Coole, and Samantha Frost have advanced such trends.¹⁶ I seek to provide three contributions to existing scholarship: 1) cultivation of a mode of political theorizing that brings micropolitics and African everyday life into dialogue; 2) a re-figuring of economy as an ethical practice; and 3) a focus on the political efficacy of earthworks.

Micropolitics and Everyday Life

I share the aims of a long tradition of environmentalism that contests anthropocentrism or all too human-centered ethical thinking, which lie at the root of current practices of ecological destruction.¹⁷ Anthropocentrism refers both to (1) the structure of concepts and beliefs that consider humans either to “constitute” or to be superior to all other nonhumans, whether species or ecosystems; and (2) to the related sets of attitudes and practices that lead to treating these ecosystems and beings in ways that give singular privilege to human interests, narrowly defined.¹⁸ One dominant strand here—thinkers such as Arne Naess, Robyn Eckersley, Peter Singer, and Paul Taylor—sees ethics as a subfield of analytic philosophy and relies upon Kantian categories of duties, rights, values, and obligations.¹⁹ While rich in insights, this model of ethics gives short shrift to the role of the human body and to the way the human body’s powers are enabled by nonhuman forces of earth—an insight confirmed by contemporary

biosciences as well as by practical wisdom. I argue that a non-anthropocentric ecopolitics requires more than an extension of rights and value to nonhumans. I emphasize the importance of bodily comportment and receptivity to “Nature.” But I also defend the view that nature is itself an actant or a set of ethico-political practices, rather than merely raw material for use or conceptualization.²⁰ Here I draw on nature writers such as Barry Lopez, Annie Dillard, William Wordsworth, and David Abram, who eschew rights- and value-talk and focus on the interface between the human body and natural bodies without explicitly theorizing it.²¹ I highlight the need for a notion of politics that extends beyond the realms of macro-level political institutions, socio-economic structures, or explicit deliberations among human participants (i.e., *macropolitics*). It is also essential to examine anthropocentrism through a *micropolitical* lens, a dimension of politics that attends to the myriad processes that shape our political sensibilities, moods, and identities.

Micropolitics allows me to explore how certain images—of the body, productivity, etc.—shape our sense of self and of being human. Some environmentalists have tended to explain life on the basis of images treated implicitly as transcendental; for example, the image of humans as enclosed organisms or bodies bounded by skin. Anthropocentrism, I contend, operates through regimes that stabilize such images. Treatment of bodies as self-enclosed individuals, sovereign consumers, or rights-bearers do not exhaust what it means to be human; they understate the complexity of entanglements between human minds, bodies, and natural forces. This is why I turn to a school of political theory known as “immanent naturalism,” which views changes in body and changes in thought as always correlated with one another, even though we cannot

specify the exact shape and extent of these changes in advance.²² I seek to advance an eco-ethical strategy informed by immanent naturalism that draws on the insights of thinkers such as Spinoza, Thoreau, Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Bennett, and Connolly. This strategy emphasizes less *how we ought to live* and more *how we could enrich experience* in ways that increase awareness of our embeddedness within a larger system of forces and flows that congeal into the earth's heterogeneous assemblages of bodies. It involves inventing techniques that act upon the body/brain network so as to alter future patterns of thought, action, and feeling. The goal is to explore an ethic of living well within the earth's capacities through a set of experimental tactics that enrich sensation and help recraft anthropocentric sensibilities. Nietzsche speaks here of "self-overcoming," Foucault—of "arts of existence," Thoreau – of "sculpting" a self.

Of course, this approach stands in some tension with, say, the eco-sensibilities of the Gurensi. So I try to move back and forth to explore these tensions and sometimes to mediate them. I pursue this strategy through a blend of textual analysis and ethnography that seeks to maintain a fine balance between concept formation and thick description. My commitment to engage both political theory and ethnography was originally prompted by debates within the anthropology of modernity, which investigates Western modernity as a culturally and historically specific phenomenon that enters into processes of hybridization with competing modernities.²³ My use of ethnography highlights ethical and ecological imaginaries that remain largely invisible within Euro-American theory. In particular, I reveal the extent to which some of the practices of ethical cultivation articulated by immanent naturalists are already lived by large numbers of people outside the West. Here I aim to advance the incorporation of ethnographic methods into the

growing field of comparative political theory.²⁴ I also build on interpretive methodologies in political science, which view knowledge as historically entangled in power relations.²⁵ I emphasize the cultivation of a mode of political theorizing that does not, say, privilege Deleuze and Guattari's knowledge over that of the Gurensi people. Such a dialogue between theory and ethnography invites African lived experience to broaden Euro-American philosophical imaginaries. It adds to studies of African micropolitics that focus on the intersection of shifting African identities and people's everyday tactics to cope with market or state disciplines.²⁶ By making body images a topic of ecopolitical research, my project moves political theory closer to the concerns of the human sciences and the anthropology of material culture, which have expanded our understanding of lived bodies as assemblages of practices, sensory-affective-motor conducts, or discourses.²⁷

Economy as an Ethical Practice

A related goal is to develop a notion of the economy as itself a set of ethical practices with ecological and political efficacy. Here I draw inspiration from, among others, the geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham and Gerda Roelvink.²⁸ They reclaim economy as a site of everyday ethical practices; they seek to enact new "body-economies" that acknowledge the interdependence of humans and nonhumans. I also build on the insights of ecological economics and Buddhist economics. Herman Daly's ecological economics offers a picture of the economy as an open subsystem of a larger ecosystem and recognizes biophysical limits to economic growth: since the earth as a whole is in an approximately steady state, the metabolic flow of the economy needs to

adapt to the earth's dynamic equilibrium.²⁹ Daly emphasizes the embeddedness of the economy within larger ecological processes and the central role of consumption in environmental degradation. E.F. Schumacher's Buddhist economics, in turn, is centered on quality of life, sufficiency, and moderation rather than limitless accumulation of commodities.³⁰

Following Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, Daly, and Schumacher, I explore economy as a crucial dimension of ethical formation and as a process enacted by the conjoint action of human and nonhuman "economy-makers." I seek to enrich Daly's and Schumacher's ecological understandings of the economy by accentuating the aesthetic dimension of economic life and by further exposing the limits of human-centered economic thinking. I question the presumption that at the heart of any economic practice lies a human agency that has been projected into modes of production and consumption. This anthropocentric bias is expressed in the ideas that nature is a set of "economic resources," that matter is inert or potentially pliable, and that plants are stockpiles of genes that can be traded according to supply and demand.

This idea of the economy as an ethical practice also raises anew the questions of the fundamental purpose of economic activity and the structure of human needs. It reveals production as consumption: consumption occurs all along the production chain as raw-material extraction and manufacturing consume human and ecological capital.³¹ This consumption angle allows us to imagine a society that prospers with much less stuff. Chapters 2 and 3, for example, suggest that in the age of the Anthropocene it may become essential to link the concept of "wealth" to the sensory enrichment derived from our entanglements with other earthly bodies and forces. The Gurensi economies of

exchange, Thoreau's economy of simplicity, and Zarathustra's economy of gift-giving all refer to such non-utilitarian assemblages of humans, earth, and machines.

The Political Efficacy of Earthworks

Eventually, it becomes imperative to stage encounters between art, ethnography, and political theory in order to highlight interdependencies between human subjectivity and earthly processes. I ask to what extent, and in what ways, public art can inflect perceptions and eco-sensibilities today. I am particularly interested in art that takes the form of earthworks, such as Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty," Richard Serra's installations, and the earthen architecture of Northern Ghana. I focus on the power of the *materials* of artwork and not only the designs of human artists. Through earthworks, I argue, the earth itself can be appreciated as a co-creator of social events, rather than merely an economic resource or material context for human action. Such arts of existence, in turn, might attune our bodies to these creative powers and reveal our own make-up as partly earth; they may enable us to perceive economy as itself, in part, an art practice with an ecological and political efficacy.

I also explore how the abstract categories of political theory speak to artistic practices that are not usually recognized as "art." Is the political efficacy of earthworks limited by the tendency to see landscape art as work produced by artists and for the sake of consumption? I put political theory into dialogue with ethnography in order to render visible to theory a long tradition of earthen architecture in Africa. African practices of earth-building, repair, and maintenance link the question of the efficacy of earthworks to everyday life. They might provide insights into the contemporary debate about

sustainability and its central question of what is to be sustained. My immersion in the everyday life of Gurensi earthen compounds as living bodies could also enrich analyses of interdependencies between human subjectivity and earthly forces. The act of sharing such ethnographic observations becomes a political act. It highlights the potential of everyday arts to modify habits of perception, producing occasions to suspend earth-destroying tendencies of consumption.

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

The dissertation, as already stated, blends interpretive and ethnographic methods. First, I use a mode of textual analysis that draws on hermeneutics and classical rhetoric. I follow Thoreau, Nietzsche, and others who offer both arguments and modes of persuasion through narrative and story telling. I examine artistically crafted texts such as *Walden* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in relation to ethnographic material and works in the visual arts, sculpture, and earthen architecture, which are also designed to touch upon the visceral register of socio-cultural life. To conduct such examinations, I deploy Michael Shapiro's "writing-as-method," a post-hermeneutic approach designed to re-fashion readers as aesthetic subjects. Writing-as-method activates an epistemology hospitable to those arts that challenge hierarchies of sense-making.³² The method involves a shift from theory building and hypothesis testing to literary enactments that mobilize ethical sensibilities, and to a practice of theory as a creative process of concept invention that co-articulates with the arts. The move back and forth between argument and narrative,

informed by “writing-as-method,” is designed to produce textual effects that sensitize the reader to interdependencies between human subjectivity and earthly processes.

Second, during my fieldwork in Ghana I adopted participant observation and immersion in the life-world of the Gurensi people. As a method, ethnography is best suited to meet the research objectives of this project and to complement textual analysis. Ethnography enables me to explore practices of sustainable living that remain largely invisible in the Euro-American literature on sustainability. It allows me to render visible subjugated knowledges and “minor literatures” that can enrich analyses.³³ Ethnography also fits the project’s key theme of the power of bodies: it draws on the physical presence of the researcher to highlight the co-generation of knowledge and to make it available to a wider audience. Thus, ethnography allows me to negotiate competing constructions of knowledge that issue from political theory and ordinary life.

Gurensi earthen compounds (*yɛa*) and sacred groves (*tingana*) were taken as key field sites, as sites offering windows into broader interdependencies between social identities and natural processes. I explore how sacred groves wield power over humans and how the lifecycles of earthen houses interact with the lifecycles of their inhabitants. Here my fieldwork is indebted to Joao Biehl and Peter Locke’s ethnographic approach to subjectivity. Biehl and Locke advance a vision of ethnography as an *art of bricolage* (bricolage is what researchers “do with theory and what people do with their lives”) that recognizes that everything we learn, we learn through our own embodied experience.³⁴ I complement Biehl and Locke’s bricolage with Kirsten Hastrup’s topographic approach to field methods, which is attuned to non-cognitive modes of learning and field experience.³⁵ This enables me to take into account how the inter-subjective context of my

research is continually being shaped by the materiality of earthen compounds and shrines. It helps me to register the affectivity of the earth in its relations with my Gurensi informants.

I have also focused on the Gurensi institution of earth custody (*tindaanaship*) and its contemporary encounters with the modern market economy. The office of the earth custodian (*tindaana*) is widely spread over Northern Ghana and is bound up with the powers of ancestors and earth shrines. Today, state claims to absolute rights over land, concessions made to businesses, and Western-inspired land tenure systems and privatization collide with customary forms of authority such as the chieftaincy and earth custody. The analysis of these collisions enriches my understanding of economy as a set of everyday practices with an ecological and political cast. While remaining mindful of the degree to which ideas of “tradition” have been historically constructed in Ghana, I explore how the Gurensi people draw on available resources such as the transforming office of the earth custodian. Can such practices be perceived as a form of art, as “life bricolage?”

In addition to participant observation, I conducted open-ended interviews with earth priests (*tindaanduuma*), chiefs (*naduma*), healers (*bagenaduma*), sectional heads (*yizukɛɛma*), land commissioners, and residents of selected Gurensi households. I approached people through “snowball sampling,” whereby initial contacts generated new ones. The interviews collected oral narratives of people’s experiences with the land, totemic animals, and various taboos. They covered a wide range of topics: the role of earthen compounds (*yɛa*), earth shrines (*tingana*), and earth custody in everyday life; perceptions of the earth (*tiŋa*) and the human; how earth shrines ensure the protection and

productivity of households and communities; how earth custodians (*tindaanas*), chiefs (*nabas*), and elders understand their obligations; why some people pay respect to the shrines and others do not. The interviews were conducted both in English and Gurene, the language of the Gurensi. I continue to study Gurene under the supervision of a Gurensi instructor.

STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

Chapter 2 pursues the theme of economy as an ethical practice in a more robust way. What is the fundamental purpose of economic activity? What do we mean by a “good life?” Is it to accumulate commodities or to create the prerequisites for a good life, one that includes many things that markets cannot provide? I stage a dialogue between Thoreau and the Gurensi earth priest, and rework key concepts of the anthropocentric repertoire of mainstream political economy—property, production, labor, and wealth—as a web of socio-ecological relationships between humans and the land. I argue that such a conversation might not only deepen Western ecopolitical imaginaries but also enrich the practice of political theory as such. Even Thoreau relies on abstract conceptual binaries such as nature/culture, subject/object, and domesticated/wild to perform an economy of simple living, wherein natural processes intertwine with social practices. Gurensi thought, on the other hand, is tied to practices and experiences that continually escape the categories of Western philosophy. Ethical life is an expression of life to the Gurensi. The dialogue between Thoreau and the earth priest outlines a practice of political theory that is less concept-centric. As we shift back and forth between these registers of theory and

ethnography, economy can be perceived as an ethical practice: a process enacted by various assemblages of earthen bodies and forces. Thoreau's model in *Walden* focuses on micro-practices of the self, and the Gurensi earth priest helps us to see how such arts of existence apply to groups of people. The life of the marketplace is revealed as one among many contemporary forms of life rather than the terminal stage of social evolution.

Chapter 3 stages another encounter between political theory and ethnography, this time between Nietzsche's perspectivism and African animism. The goal is to enable us to see sustainable living not as an amended "lifestyle" but as a web of long-term interactions with the land. Building on the revision of economy as a more-than-human domain, I explore Zarathustra's economy of gift-giving in relation to the economies of reciprocity of the Gurensi people of Ghana. In contrast to ethnocentric representations of "subsistence" economies, I show that these are economies characterized by an ecologically balanced ratio of production to need. Such models treat the environment as giving. Economic dispositions—at least, at their best—are predicated upon trust in abundance, in contrast to Western preoccupations with scarcity and high consumption. In place of a political economy of control, we have the socio-ecological control of economy: society inhibits accumulation and ensures sustainability through redistribution and sharing of the surplus that the land bestows upon humans. Zarathustra and the Gurensi earth priest together reveal how such relations of reciprocity are *power* relations. For the Gurensi, power relations take the form of a debt that humans pay back to the earth, which is filled with reciprocating ancestors.

Nietzsche's emphasis on agon and struggle, in turn, presents the exchange between humans and nonhumans as *agonistic* reciprocity. For both Zarathustra and the

Gurensi earth priest, to know means to personify more than to objectify. Knowledge becomes not a set of specifications to “pass down” from generation to generation but rather a heightened perceptual sensitivity that reveals the earth as an animate knowledge-holder or locus of wisdom. This understanding of knowledge troubles familiar philosophical demarcations between epistemology and ontology.

Chapter 4 examines the role that visual arts, sculpture, and earthen architecture can play in enhancing our sensitivities and in forging negotiations between Western and African thought. The first sections explore a notion of art as modes of bodily intensification whose power lie not first and foremost in meanings but in the sensations elicited and intensified. I show how encounters with earthworks such as Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* could enable our bodies and perceptions—always acting conjointly with other bodies—to evolve in new ecological directions. The aesthetic experience of earthworks can trigger perceptions that may interrupt anthropocentric habits. Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, for example, mobilizes intersecting tiers of duration, some of which are human, and others not; it heightens sensitivity to cycles of ecological degradation and regeneration. As a corollary, I explore how Richard Serra’s installations alter received notions of human agency. The act of human creativity now becomes merely one mode of the distributive agency of human-nonhuman assemblages. However, my research identifies a significant limit to the political efficacy of earthworks: works such as Smithson’s and Serra’s tend to be detached from everyday life and are often consumed as land art. This is why in the last section I turn to the study of African earthen architecture, which intertwines earthly processes with the everyday lifecycles of people and household economies.

Chapter 5 draws political theory and ethnography into an engagement with orature. The term “orature” was coined by the Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu to counter the tendency to treat the oral traditions of African thought as an inferior stage in a linear evolution towards modern literature and writing. The chapter puts Gurensi orature into dialogue with Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of “minor literature,” which refers to a way of appropriating language as a “collective utterance” to call forth new political identities and sensitivities. Minor literature does not occur “apart from” a major literature but, on the contrary, operates from within, making dominant anthropocentric orientations of language “stutter.” Likewise, orature makes perceptible what has not or cannot be heard or perceived otherwise: how land speaks. By sensitizing us to the expressivity of the land as reciprocating ancestors, I argue that orature might effect a “stutter” in the majoritarian orientations of Euro-American environmental political theory. It might give voice to the “subjugated” knowledges and *earthen* languages of African people that trouble the dual colonization of the aural-oral by the literary and of nonhumans by humans. Together, orature and minor literature highlight the irreducible moment of independence possessed by the materiality of socio-ecological landscapes vis-à-vis narrative constructions of collective conditions and history. I show that in Northern Ghana the collective enunciations of orature are not confined to human bodies alone. They include lively socio-cultural landscapes that narrate and record events in their own right.

¹ The Gurensi live in the Bolgatanga Municipal and Bongo districts in the Upper East Region of Ghana. In the Bongo area they live together with the Boosi, a related group with different founding ancestors. The term “Gurensi” is a common but controversial ethnic identification, as some of the Gurensi’s neighbors use the term in a derogatory sense. In English-speaking conversations, and in conversations with Ghanaians unfamiliar with the Upper East, one often hears “Frafra,” a colonial term derived from a local greeting, which lumps the Gurensi and the Boosi together alongside the Nabnam and the Tallensi (and their respective languages as “Farafara”). In spite of the lack of consensus, most of the elders and knowledge-holders in the communities I interacted with insisted on the use of the name “Gurensi.” Both Gurene (the language of the Gurensi) and Boone (the language of the Boosi) belong to the Mole-Dagbane language

group. It is not uncommon, however, for every community or cluster of communities in the Bongo and Bolgatanga area to identify themselves by their local speech—for instance, the Zoko communities as speakers of Zagene. Many of the earth-bound practices described in this essay apply also to the Boosi. However, since most of my discussions refer to the areas around Bolgatanga, Gowrie, and Zoko, I have decided to use the term Gurensi unless specifically referring to the residents of the Bongo Township. For a study that illuminates the distinctive historical trajectory of clan genealogies and relationships, political authority, language, and belonging among the Gurensi and the Boosi see Christopher Azaare, *A History of the Bongo District* (forthcoming).

² Chris Azaare, in discussion with the author, Gowrie, August 15, 2012.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 40-41.

⁵ Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 148, 154.

⁶ Thoreau, *Walden*, 90.

⁷ Richardson, *Henry Thoreau*, 150-53.

⁸ Thoreau, *Walden*, 221.

⁹ Thoreau, "Walking," 105.

¹⁰ Thoreau, *Walden*, 138.

¹¹ Richardson, *Henry Thoreau*, 8.

¹² Ibid., 150.

¹³ Cornelia Dean, "Thoreau is Rediscovered as a Climatologist," *The New York Times*, October 28, 2008.

¹⁴ Richardson, *Henry Thoreau*, 22.

¹⁵ For an excellent overview of the sustainability debate see "The Sustainability Debate," in *Green Planet Blues: Four Decades of Global Environmental Politics*, ed. Ken Conca and Geoffrey Dabelko (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009), 201-42.

¹⁶ See Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010); William E. Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011); Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁷ See Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968).

¹⁸ Paul W. Taylor, "The Ethics of Respect for Nature," in *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*, ed. Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 74, 81.

¹⁹ Robyn Eckersley, *The Green State: Rethinking Democracy and Sovereignty* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004); Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002); Paul W. Taylor, "The Ethics of Respect for Nature," in *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*, ed. Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 74-84.

²⁰ According to Jane Bennett, an actant is "a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has effectivity or sufficient coherence to produce effects or that make a difference or alter the course of events." (Jane Bennett, "The Solar Judgment of Walt Whitman," in *A Political Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. John E. Seery [Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011], 134).

²¹ See David Abram, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Vintage, 2010); Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper, 2007); Barry Lopez, *Of Wolves and Men* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2004); William Wordsworth, *The Pedlar, Tintern Abbey, Two-Part Prelude* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Here my thinking is also influenced by ecofeminist thinkers who emphasize the importance of human receptivity to a nonhuman world swarming with a creativity and agency of its own. For instance, Plumwood, Haraway, and Apffel-Marglin and Sanchez all eschew the duties- and value-talk of philosophers such as Singer and Taylor and focus instead on the human body-natural bodies interface. Plumwood speaks of a posture of openness towards earth others; Haraway of cyborg identities that rework nature and culture for feminist ends; Apffel-Marglin and Sanchez of building community identities in the Peruvian Andes and of ways of living as earth that reject the dual mastery over nature and women. See Frederique Apffel-Marglin and Loyda Sanchez, "Developmentalist Feminism and

Neocolonialism in Andean Communities” in *Feminist Post-Development Thought: Rethinking Modernity, Post-colonialism, and Representation*, ed. Kriemild Saunders (London: Zed Books, 2004), 159-79; Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002).

²² It is *naturalistic* in refusing to embrace the human as a preordained ordering principle of the world, a principle frequently engendered by some form of dualism or commitment to a supranatural force. It is *immanent* in “identifying protean forces—forces that can disturb the ‘actuality’ of relatively stable things, beings, processes, systems, etc. These forces, when activated under certain conditions, periodically introduce, say a new species, weather system, or human brain/body pattern into the universe” (William E. Connolly, “Experience and Experiment,” *Daedalus* 135, no. 3 [Summer 2006]: 70).

²³ For example, see Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

²⁴ The themes I am advancing in relation to comparative political theory share a lot with those of Farah Godrej in *Cosmopolitan Political Thought: Method, Practice, Discipline* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Godrej develops a new methodology that involves a continuous alternation and negotiation between two primary modalities on the part of the comparative political theorist: *self-dislocation* and *self-relocation*. Self-dislocation “requires her to leave her disciplinary home, immersing herself in the practices, modes of inquiry, scholarly conventions, and intellectual resources of another tradition” (17). Theorists seek to exit the parameters of Westcentric political thought both literally and imaginatively, which may eventually require that all of them engage in some form of fieldwork, in physical dislocations from the comforts of home. The lived immersion in unfamiliar lifeworlds and traditions alters one’s own positionality and style of thinking in ways that are unavailable to the “armchair” traveler (20, 54). According to Godrej, self-dislocation must be accompanied by a second positionality, *self-relocation*. Self-relocation is a return—though not necessarily a physical return—that resituates oneself “within familiar debates with a reconstituted vision that brings new methodological and substantive insights to bear on them” (75). Such process highlights the provincialism of Western political thought without disavowing the insights of political theory as we know it. Rather, the insights gained from fieldwork are brought to bear on research questions and problems. For various approaches to the study of comparative political theory see Fred Dallmayer, ed., *Border Crossings: Toward a Comparative Political Theory* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999); Roxanne L. Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travellers in Search of Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Stuart Gray, “A Historical-Comparative Approach to Indian Political Thought: Locating and Examining Domesticated Differences,” *History of Political Thought* 31, no. 3 (2010): 383-406; Leigh Jenco, “What Does Heaven Ever Say?: A Methods-Centered Approach to Cross-Cultural Engagement,” *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 4 (November 2007): 741-55; Andrew March, “What is Comparative Political Theory?,” *Review of Politics* 71, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 531-65; Anthony Parel and Ronald C. Keith, eds., *Comparative Political Philosophy: Studies under the Upas Tree* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1992).

²⁵ Interpretive methodologies in political science cover a variety of empirical and qualitative research strategies, including discourse analysis, hermeneutics, ordinary language interviewing, ethnographic participant observation, critical historical analysis, visual analysis, and archival research. See Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983); Tim Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Frederic Charles Schaffer, *Democracy in Translation: Understanding Politics in an Unfamiliar Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Edward Schatz, ed., *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009); Michael Shapiro, *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2013); Lisa Wedeen, “Reflections on Ethnographic Work in Political Science,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 13 (2010): 255-72.

²⁶ See David Hecht and Maliqalim Simone, *Invisible Governance: The Art of African Micropolitics* (New York: Autonomedia, 1994).

²⁷ See Margaret Lock and Judith Farquhar, eds., *Beyond the Body Proper: Reading the Anthropology of Material Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Victor Turner, *Schism and Continuity in an African*

Society: A Study of Ndembu Village Life (Manchester: Rhodes Livingston Institute, 1957); Jean-Pierre Warnier, *The Pot-King: The Body and Technologies of Power* (Boston: Brill Publishing, 2007).

²⁸ J.K. Gibson-Graham and Gerda Roelvink, "An Economic Ethics for the Anthropocene," *Antipode* 41, no. S1 (January 2010): 320-46.

²⁹ Herman E. Daly, *Steady-State Economics* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1991).

³⁰ E. F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics As If People Mattered* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010).

³¹ Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates, and Ken Conca, eds., *Confronting Consumption* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

³² Michael Shapiro, *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

³³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).

³⁴ Joao Biehl and Peter Locke, "Deleuze and the Anthropology of Becoming," *Current Anthropology* 51, no. 3 (June 2010): 346.

³⁵ Kirsten Hastrup, "Emotional Topographies: The Sense of Place in the Far North" in *Emotions in the Field: The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience*, ed. James Davies and Dimitrina Spencer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 191-211.

Chapter 2

Thoreau Goes to Ghana: On the Wild and the *Tingane*



...in Wildness is the preservation of the World. Every tree sends its fibres forth in search of the Wild...Men plow and sail for it. From the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU, *Walking*

The founder might have been a strong farmer and when he was farming he met something extraordinary, for example, maybe a ring or an extraordinary stone. So he was afraid of this stone...he would carry it home and keep it somewhere, and he would consult his elders in the village...the soothsayer will come and tell them: “Oh, this is your great grandmother...She loves her great grandchildren so much that she has come back in the form of this particular, extraordinary stone to live with you.” So they did not just choose a place where to make sacrifices but something extraordinary, something beyond their knowledge must have been seen there.

ELDER, *In discussion with the author*

WHICH OR WHO IS THAT STONE?

A pile of stones marks the abode of the poet from Concord, Massachusetts who sought refuge from a society that dulls, commodifies, and domesticates. Today, the urge to build a hut in the woods and simplify our lives—to front “only the essential facts of life” and the Wild that enchants and lures us into communion with Nature—remains strong.¹ The cairn is ever growing, “each pious pilgrim adding his stone to the shrine.”²

The shrine memorializes a way of living that revealed that there is more to “Economy”—the title of the opening chapter of *Walden*—than markets and humans. The stones have become totems of the various conservationist, back-to-nature, anti-industry, non-conformist, voluntary simplicity, DIY, and homesteading communities who continue to act upon Thoreau’s intuitions.

A pile of stones also marks the *tingane*, the abode of the earth gods of the Gurensi people of Northern Ghana. Gurensiland is mapped out into a network of *tingana* (pl.)—sacred groves, rocks, rivers, caves, grasslands—in which the spirits of the ancestors come back to live with the clan or the village. Other trees, rivers, and rocks mark the boundary from *tingane* to *tingane*. Seasonal sacrifices are performed to each *tingane* by indigenous clans presided over by the *tindaana* (earth priest or land owner). The *tindaana* mediates between the earth gods, the ancestors, and the community. He wears animal skins and a black twined cap or a calabash as the insignia of his office of the custodian of the land (*tiŋa*). He allocates land for settlement, building, farming, animal rearing, market- and graveyard-sites and various development projects. The *tingane* is propitiated by the *tindaana*’s offerings of millet flour, local beer (*daamolega*) and animals. It is on the pile of stones that the blood of fowls and animals is poured and the feathers of the fowls placed. The *tingane*, in turn, assists the community with good harvests, fertility and procreation, warding off droughts and diseases. Most *tingana* are habitats both for the community spirits and for various medicinal plants, trees, birds’ nests, bats, larger reptiles and mammals, and reservoirs of water. As the stones demarcate *tiŋa* as a sacred enclosure, they trouble demarcations between subject and object, nature and culture, living and non-living. Some stones become deceased humans; others, border-crossing

signs. Humans are the extended kin and family of *tiŋa* who manifests her presence in stones.

What happens if Thoreau goes to Ghana? What happens if we read *Walden* on nature and economy after talking to a Gurensi earth priest? This chapter stages encounters between Thoreau's Wild and the Gurensi *tingane*. The goal is to explore an ethic of living well within the earth's capacities through a set of experimental tactics that enrich sensation and help recraft anthropocentric sensibilities. Nietzsche describes such tactics of self-artistry as "self-overcoming"; Foucault, as "arts of existence."³ I will use these ideas to explore how political responses to the ecological crisis shift once we take seriously the powers of earthly forces to shape our identities. This will expand on recent trends in political theory—such as Bennett's "New Materialism"—which challenge understandings of politics as an exclusively human domain by re-thinking political contestation as including influences from nonhuman bodies.⁴

Both Thoreau and the Gurensi earth priest engage in human-nonhuman assemblage-making at the crossroads of market and community economies. Both prompt us to re-experience economy as one such assemblage that distributes multiple degrees of agency and creativity along a continuum of human and more-than-human bodies and forces. Such cross-cultural encounters might even help us to reconnect what we now see as distinct spheres: the "economic," the "ecological," and the "spiritual." They might make visible politico-economic relations as ecological relations; ecological relations as kinship relations, intertwining humans, other species, gods, and the earth (*tiŋa*). However, this chapter does not merely ask whether Thoreau's ideas about economy and distributed agency can be transferred to different ethical and geographical contexts. I seek

to highlight what productive engagements can be forged at the point where such ideas are no longer transferable and the limits of familiar concepts such as agency, economy, and subjectivity become evident.

There is another reason to take political theory to “the field”: to address an anticipated chorus of skeptics about the plausibility of projects like Bennett’s New Materialism or Thoreau’s life of frugal living. “Who would do this today? Who would practice such tactics of self-artistry that sensitize us to human embeddedness within a world that swarms with vital forces, agencies, and bodies?” How would our experiences of “economy” and “property” change? Ethnography is too rarely used as a mode of inquiry within political theory, which relies heavily upon textual analysis. The commitment to textual analysis blocks our ability to explore the ways in which philosophy intersects with everyday life. Theory and ethnography could strengthen each other: if a fine-tuned ethnography can uncover the subtle workings of everyday life and their entwinement with questions of the earth’s agency, theory can help to develop the conceptual specificity of those dynamics. Such exchanges could reveal certain aspects of our humanity that we are not able to recognize easily as our own.⁵ As an ethnographer I became a participant in a privileged experience that sensitized me to the ways in which Gurensi *tindaanas*, chiefs, and elders body forth and interact with a lively earth that, in turn, interacts with and nurtures them. As a theorist I came to appreciate the worth of such lived experiences of “ourselves,” in which I was bestowed new lifeworlds and identities.⁶ Ethnography allows me to show that the ethical practices described by the New Materialist or Thoreau are already approximated and lived elsewhere by large numbers of people. A conversation between theory and ethnography renders visible such

existing ethical universes and brings to light newly available resources for contemporary ecopolitical action.

Such a conversation might not only deepen Western ecopolitical imaginaries but also enrich the practice of theory as such. Thoreau relies on abstract conceptual distinctions such as nature/culture, subject/object, and domesticated/wild to perform an economy of simple living, which intertwines natural processes with social practices of ethical subject formation. The Gurensi people, on the other hand, invite us to partake in a multiplicity of lived experiences that continually escape the categories through which Western philosophy has tended to order such multiplicities. Ethical life is known as lived by the Gurensi. This does not mean, however, that this conversation draws together intrinsically different techniques. The earth priest also theorizes as he locates spiritual power in stones. In *Walden* Thoreau conducts a radical ethnography of Concord's everyday life. The idea is to start in the middle by putting thought and lived experience on a par. The dialogue to be staged between Thoreau and the earth priest suggests the outlines of a practice of political theory that is less concept-centric. We can now alternate between theory and ethnography as two overlapping registers or distributions of emphasis within political thinking.

As we “front” together the Wild and the *tingane*, and shift back and forth between these two registers, economy itself can be perceived as an ethical practice with an ecological and political cast: a process enacted by various assemblages of earthen bodies and forces. In the pages to follow I show how a dialogue between Thoreau and the Gurensi *tindaana* prompts us to refigure key concepts of the anthropocentric repertoire of mainstream understandings of economy: 1) Production: the earth becomes a co-producer

of the material conditions of human life and the common good rather than an economic resource; 2) Wealth: becomes the capacity to mobilize ancestral assistance and mutually supportive networks of aid and reciprocity between humans and nonhumans rather than an immense accumulation of commodities; 3) Property: poetic/spiritual enclosures that reveal ways of apprehending the land without possessing it as enclosed commons; 4) Work: practices of negotiated interdependence with other economy-makers rather than monotonous, alienated labor.⁷ The life of the marketplace is revealed as one among many contemporary forms of life rather than the terminal stage of social evolution. To highlight the key points of contact and contrast between Thoreau's and the *tindaana*'s practices of economy-making, the next two sections examine how each set of practices is woven into the land and into habits of perception, place, and the body. Whereas Thoreau's model in *Walden* focuses on micro-practices of the self, the Gurensi earth priest helps us to see how such arts of existence apply in the first instance to groups of people. If it is Thoreau's solitary communing with Walden that extends his body into natural processes and forces, it is the experience of being a part of a farming community bound together by the earth gods that enables the Gurensi to come to terms with nature so that everyday activities can take place. I end by putting Thoreau and the Gurensi into a direct dialogue in the aim of mobilizing a practice of theory as a creative process of concept invention that co-articulates with ethnography. Let me begin with Thoreau first.

“ENJOY THE LAND, BUT OWN IT NOT”: FROM POSSESSIONS TO POETIC ENCLOSURES

Thoreau's own body-economy is entangled with a variety of nonhuman bodies and processes. The act of distancing himself from society—including from his inner conventionality—allows him to move closer to the earth as the perennial source of life, and to a community whose members are not exclusively human. At *Walden* Thoreau was “no more lonely than the Mill Brook, or a weathercock, or the northstar, or the south wind, or an April shower, or a January thaw, or the first spider in a new house.”⁸ Various tempos and durations conjoin inside Thoreau's house, which itself becomes a porous extension of Thoreau's individual body. This compound body mixes human subjectivity, cosmic and earthly processes. It is nested within larger cosmological processes, putting Thoreau's everyday arts of existence into contact with the remote and unexplored regions of a universe that is “wider than our views of it.”⁹ Thoreau says that ideally, the poet would “live in the open air” and spend his nights without any obstruction between him and the celestial bodies.¹⁰

An open-air abode nurtures the poetic imagination and troubles received anthropocentric regimes of perception. So does the porous frame of Thoreau's unplastered cabin: “This frame, so slightly clad, was a sort of crystallization around me, and reacted on the builder.”¹¹ The frame reacts on the builder and imbues him with a bodily understanding of the shared materiality of the house as an earthly actant.¹² Built from a mix of easily available, reused, man-made and Nature-furnished materials, the house is a living monument to Thoreau's friendship and collaboration with the pine tree.¹³ He compares the house to a birdcage in a neighborhood of “those wilder and more

thrilling songsters of the forest...the wood-thrush, the veery, the scarlet tanager, the field-sparrow, the whippoorwill.”¹⁴ The cabin is furnished with fresh mountain air: it is “a sort of porch at the entrance of a burrow” to the earth.¹⁵ To move to the shore of the pond means to settle into the larger household (*oikos*) of the earth. The earth is the body and the milieu, which provides Thoreau with the “equable temperature” and resources to reconstruct his “shell” and transform himself corporally. Like a skin, the house is an extension of the body: “The most interesting dwellings in this country, as the painter knows, are the most unpretending, humble log huts and cottages of the poor commonly; it is the life of the inhabitants whose shells they are, and not any peculiarity in their surfaces merely, which makes them *picturesque*.”¹⁶

A house is not an object or a commodity so much as the name of the intimate *relationship* between humans, other species and the earth. The beauty of a house inheres not in architectural ornament or luxurious furniture but in the density of its relationships and in the way that density is given architectural expression. Here the best method is to construct “their dwellings with their own hands,” as birds make their own nests. Then, “the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged.”¹⁷ Practices of construction, maintenance, and repair, like the task of providing “food for themselves and families simply and honestly enough” yield not only economic independence but also a more poetic imagination.¹⁸ The latter is crucial to building a healthy economy, in which humans can live well while living within the earth’s capacities, “for a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.”¹⁹

Thoreau's house is a "seat" for his flesh and blood and bones, just as the earth provides such an accommodation for Thoreau's house, which is "*seated* by the shore of Walden pond."²⁰ Thoreau thus presents a literal *oikos* (household economy) as profoundly dependent upon a larger ecosystem whose processes are governed by the interplay of permanence and impermanence. Houses can be built, maintained, and rebuilt multiple times but ultimately they decay and die, merging back with the lively materiality of the earth. The lifecycle and rhythm of Thoreau's poetic dwelling interact with the lifecycles of Thoreau and the earth as intertwined rhythms, making visible the fleeting character of private property and the impossibility of "enclosing" the living processes of the earth.

Thoreau comes to terms with this impossibility by translating his own acquisitive tendencies into poetic modes of satisfying needs and wants. His imagination is a trustee, not an owner, of other people's possessions, such as orchard woodlots and pastures. This poetic trusteeship is designed to provide a way not only to confront the will to possess and the tendency to overconsume, but also to transition to an economy of simplicity without forcibly expropriating goods from the wealthy.²¹ The modern economy is focused on the production, distribution, and consumption of commodities. Thoreau's economy is based upon the accumulation of rich experiences, memories, lifestyle adaptations, and other noncommodity modes of satisfaction.

The closest Thoreau comes to having his fingers "burned by actual possession" is when he buys the Hollowell farm.²² Even before he obtains the deed for it, the owner's wife changes her mind and Thoreau resells the farm for what he paid for it. Yet, the

experience renders Thoreau wealthier as he “retains” the landscape and “encloses” the farm in a rhyme:

I have frequently seen a poet withdraw, having enjoyed the most valuable part of a farm, while the crusty farmer supposed that he had got a few wild apples only. Why, the owner does not know it for many years when a poet has put his farm in rhyme, the most admirable kind of invisible fence, has fairly impounded it, milked it, skimmed it, and got all the cream, and left the farmer only the skimmed milk. The real attractions of the Hollowell farm, to me, were; its complete retirement, being about two miles from the village, half a mile from the nearest neighbor, and separated from the highway by a broad field...the gray color and ruinous state of the house and barn, and the dilapidated fences, which put such an interval between me and the last occupant; the hollow and lichen-covered apple trees, gnawed by rabbits, showing what kind of neighbors I should have; but above all, the recollection I had of it from my earliest voyages up the river, when the house was concealed behind a dense grove of red maples, through which I heard the house-dog bark²³

Thoreau advances an alternative mode of land use and appropriation—a *poetic enclosure*—that provides access to multiple kinds of non-material wealth and limits the earth-destroying tendencies of consumption. Unlike the farmer who “deforms” the landscape, treats the soil as a property, and “knows Nature but as a robber,” the poet retains the landscape and rejoices in the sight of “dilapidated fences” and other traces of the loss of consummate human agency and control.²⁴ The poet’s enclosure of the land enlivens without destroying and uses only renewable energy sources; it lacks utility for a market with winners and losers. Thoreau’s poetic enclosure draws on processes of earthly excess and regeneration, childhood recollections, and the enfolded nature of time in order to produce the good life. It allows the influx of experience to make its impact on the sensorium. Need-reduction and contemplation replace consumption, as the quality of relationships between human, rabbit, lake, and bird neighbors increases. This can be considered a poetic economy of bodily comportment, sensory intensification, and connection. Later we will see that the Gurensi earth priest performs a ritual enclosure that

approximates the poet's experiential self-artistry without locating it in subject-object relationships as Thoreau does.

Thoreau reclaims economy as a site of everyday ethical practices, enacting new “body-economies” at the core of which is the negotiation of interdependence between humans and nonhumans.²⁵ Such an economy is based on satisfying a small set of modest needs, which are intertwined with the needs of birds, trees, soils, and lakes. Thoreau's concerns about the exploitative interdependence between producers and non-producers are linked to a concern for the unaccounted-for exploitation of the nonhuman world. In *Walden*, our beds are recognized as our “night-clothes” and more-than-human extended skin, “robbing the nests and breasts of birds to prepare this shelter within shelter.”²⁶ When Thoreau looks at the car-loads of pine, spruce, Manilla hemp, and palm leaf headed to cover “flaxen New England heads,” he does not see timber or commodities for sale. He sees “proof-sheets” of nature's contribution to the economy and lists the multiple ecological and anthropological uses these bodies served before they acquired the status of “goods.”²⁷ In Thoreau's economy, goods are never fully uprooted from the productive economy of nature. His economic imaginary respects the qualitative distinction between primary (nature-made) and secondary (man-made) goods, according to which the latter presuppose the availability of the former. This is a distinction that markets do not recognize. With Thoreau, production is revealed to be consumption: consumption occurs all along the commodity chain as raw-material extraction and manufacturing consume both human and ecological wealth. Rather than a uniquely human capacity, production becomes a conjoint human-nonhuman endeavor that highlights the role of humans as co-producers and converters of primary products from the earth. Thoreau's economy

encourages the production of relational goods such as cross-species kinship and neighborliness, the consumption of which do not reduce the available stock.²⁸

In *A Winter Walk* Thoreau calls forth from the potentials of his body-economy a series of such affinities with winter's productive economy. During his winter stroll, the poet draws on the "slumbering subterranean fire in nature which never goes out" and which courses through the materiality of all earthly existence, including Thoreau's own breast.²⁹ Rather than a harsh winter environment in which a petrovorous economy would be brought to a halt without an immense waste of energy, walking in the thick snow enables the poet to discern vital, thriving natural productivity at work all year round.³⁰ This intensification of perception of the interdependencies between human subjectivity and earthly processes renders economy a more-than-human domain. Aspirations of the good life become recast in ecological terms: humans are now positioned not as masters but as co-participants in a vibrant earthly economy: "We fancy ourselves in the interior of a larger house. The surface of the pond is our deal table or sanded floor, and the woods rise abruptly from its edge, like the walls of a cottage."³¹ Thoreau's winter walk enables the experience of becoming a "piece of forest furniture" and a member of the "natural family of man."³² Such descriptions register the agency of a powerful and infinitely patient earth in contrast to recent environmentalist representations of the earth as a fragile body perturbed by human interference. Just as "the snow falls on every wood and field, and no crevice is forgotten," with "so little effort does nature reassert her rule, and blot out the traces of men."³³ Nature rules by default.

For all his celebration of the powers of Nature, Thoreau's practice of walking also reveals another, ambivalent side of the poet that threatens to re-incorporate these powers

back into the human. Thoreau is also a Western pioneer. His essay “Walking” is a case in point. Early in the essay Thoreau tells us that he walks at least four hours a day. Walking is not merely an exercise or a stroll but Thoreau’s “enterprise of the day,” which requires relinquishing all familial and social attachments: “If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again,—if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk.”³⁴ According to Thoreau, any space of politics has an outside: all one needs to do in order to opt out is to walk away, or better, walk outdoors.³⁵ The saunterer produces his own rules and regulations, defying authority and social convention. Walking runs on one’s bodily energy and becomes an expression of self-sufficiency and trust in the body’s capacities.

Ironically, as the essay progresses, Thoreau, the proponent of setting one’s own route, portrays himself as waiting for an invitation to walk into Nature: “with regard to Nature I live a sort of border life, on the confines of a world into which I make occasional and transient forays only...Unto a life which I call natural I would gladly follow even a will-o’-the-wisp through bogs and sloughs unimaginable, but no moon nor fire-fly has shown me the causeway to it.”³⁶ The walker travels a shifting boundary between nature and civilization, without finding a home in either domain. Each walk redistributes the balance between domestication and wildness, identity and excess across Thoreau’s body. Here wildness is experienced as transcendent, as that which is different or recalcitrant in the continuum of inner and outer worlds—of nature and culture—that Thoreau’s travel aims to negotiate.

Thoreau's transcendence is not so much vertical as it is horizontal, spatial, earthbound.³⁷ Rather than invoking the otherworldly, transcendence here marks the excess of perception and incompleteness of Thoreau's encounters with Nature. Despite all of his attempts to walk over to the Wild, Thoreau remains distanced from Nature's mysteries, partly because of his complicated relationship with the march of Western progress. On the one hand, going west means fronting the Wild in response to Nature's guiding call. The sunset inspires Thoreau "with the desire to go to a West as distant and as fair as that into which the sun goes down."³⁸ Walking west horizontalizes encounters between humans and nonhumans. As the companion of the sun whose rays bathe all equally, the saunterer suspends the tendency to rank order the bodies he confederates with. On the other hand, such companionship means that Thoreau can never settle on one place and literally seeks to encompass the earth. The walker is revealed to be a "Great Western Pioneer" who follows in the footsteps of the white settlers and conquistadors, including Columbus, who "felt the westward tendency more strongly than any before. He obeyed it and found a New World for Castile and Leon."³⁹ Thoreau advocates leaving the established society of the "Old World and its institutions" in order to recreate that society in the new "wilder" setting of Oregon. The pioneers tap into wildness to revitalize the Europeans who follow in their wake. He praises the Indian for having closer ties to Nature, and yet he also needs the Indian to disappear (or at least would render this outcome "natural") in order to make way for Western progress: "I think that the farmer displaces the Indian even because he redeems the meadow, and so makes himself stronger and in some respect more natural."⁴⁰ To "go native" requires the disappearance of the native. It requires, in a sense, becoming implicated, however reluctantly, in the

conquest and destruction of nature. At Walden, this ambivalence becomes apparent in the bean field which sensitizes Thoreau to a swirl of violences and memories of previous cultivation: “I disturbed the ashes of unchronicled nations who in primeval years lived under these heavens... They lay mingled with other natural stones, some of which bore the marks of having been burned by Indian fires, and some by the sun, and also bits of pottery and glass brought hither by the recent cultivators of the soil.”⁴¹ Thoreau is both a chronicler and a benefactor in a forest humanized by conquest. He learns how to farm without sharing the doom of those who had cultivated the earth before him to make way for his poetic trusteeship of the land.⁴²

If Thoreau’s walks—with all their contradictions—trouble the default regime of anthropocentric perception, so does his practice of hoeing beans. While the beans are growing, Thoreau hoes from “five o’clock in the morning till noon,” a labor that is repetitive, even monotonous, but still different from the alienated labor of Concord businessmen and farmers.⁴³ Diligent hoeing, on the other hand, is a part of an assemblage where the human co-acts with a range of other economy-makers: “My auxiliaries are the dews and rains which water this dry soil, and what fertility is in the soil itself... My enemies are worms, cool days, and most of all woodchucks... But what right had I to... break up their ancient herb garden?”⁴⁴ The task of his daily toil is to persuade “the earth to say beans instead of grass” and to “make this portion of the earth’s surface, which has yielded cinquefoil, blackberries... sweet wild fruits and pleasant flowers, produce instead this pulse.”⁴⁵ This experience of work as an orchestrated activity, located in the mutually cooperative relationship between human and nonhuman participants, brings Thoreau’s bean-field closer to the seasonal rain-fed ecology of the Gurensi farm.

The relation between Thoreau and the earth is characterized by mutuality and intimacy, though not equality.

Cultivation is conventionally conceived as production that adds “value.” Hoeing beans alerts us, instead, to the value subtraction that accompanies disturbing the ecosystem that preceded the cultivation.⁴⁶ In the case of fossil fuel-based industrial agriculture, the intensive use of waste sink capacity and energy to better exploit forests and grasslands might entail permanent depletion. Finally, Thoreau’s “war” with the beans’ “enemies”—Roman wormwood, pigweed, sorrel, and piper-grass—sensitizes us to the anthropocentrism of our default vocabulary. Bodies that are of instrumental use to humans become “crops” and plants and insects that compete with them are stigmatized as “weeds” or “pests.”⁴⁷ But why, after all, “Shall I not rejoice also at the abundance of the weeds whose seeds are the granary of the birds?”⁴⁸ Thoreau folds a degree of spiritualization of enmity into bean cultivation that involves forbearance and recognition of the right of worms and woodchucks to their “ancient herb garden.” Here Connolly’s understanding of “spiritualization of enmity” can be extended to Thoreau’s labor in the bean-field, which becomes an ethical process of building and maintaining agonistic relationships between friends and adversaries across species divides. The aim of these relationships is to live respectfully with each other through the mutual recognition of the contestable position from which each species proceeds.⁴⁹ Another lesson to draw from Thoreau’s bean-field is that agency is distributed and negotiated.⁵⁰

Of course, one might object to Thoreau on several grounds: How can this model be applied to large groups of people? Should this Thoreauvian ethic of living well with less be sustained and reproduced with or without its ambivalences? In the next section,

we turn to the Gurensi people to address these questions. They alert us to the politicization of the traditionally marginalized domain of families and households where human life is generated and socialization reproduced, a theme undertheorized in Thoreau's writings.⁵¹ One could, however, extend Thoreau's practices of concept-invention to view writing itself as a reproductive economy. The move back and forth between argument and narrative produces bodily effects that may encourage gratitude toward nonhumans and awareness of the interdependencies between human subjectivity and earthly processes. The reader becomes Thoreau's walking companion, lodged comfortably within the earth's household. Would such companionship co-opt or exclude politics? As Thoreau goes to Ghana, will Nature remain "wild?" We have seen that the traveler can encounter the land both as a frontier of Western progress and as poetic commons that temper such drives toward mastery. Apprehending and degrading the earth can become mixed up with yielding to its lively agencies. It may be that in the contrast with the Gurensi earth priest the poet becomes scrubbed of the pioneer. At the same time, certain things that the Gurensi feel ambivalent about may become apparent too.

"THE EARTH IS LIKE A SKIN": BLOOD, EXCHANGE, AND SPIRITUAL ENCLOSURES

...tiŋa is like a skin. Tiŋa means earth...the earth is a womb, the womb of a woman and you see how delicate the womb of a woman is. So we are all buried in that like a child lies in the mother's womb.

CHRISTOPHER AZAARE

Unlike Thoreau's Nature, nature in Gurensiland is experienced as the visible domain of the spiritual world: a heterogeneous assemblage of smaller gods. Some aspects

of nature express themselves as spirits and vice versa. This is how the earth gods, wind gods, rain gods, and sky gods, which together express the turbulent materiality of *tiŋa*, arose. *Tiŋa* (literally “earth” or “land” in the local Gurene language) is the irreplaceable biophysical foundation of community life.⁵² Gurensi *tiŋa* lies within the Northern Savanna Ecological Zone, which is shaped by the interplay between a wet season from May to October and a long, dry season from October to April. The Gurensi clock registers this interplay: it is “a sort of ‘earth clock’ regulated by weather, either that which is occurring or, in some instances, was expected to occur.”⁵³ The vegetation is dry Guinea-Savanna woodland interspersed with grass, low shrubs, and rocky outcrops. The most common trees are the shea nut, dawadawa, baobab, and acacia. Most family compounds and the things found inside them are made from mud, clay, grass, fibers, and trees. Gurensi compounds rise out of the *oikos* of the earth as assemblages of humans, family gods and livestock that grow old and wither away together.



Gurensi compound

The gate of each compound faces west: “You don’t leave the gate towards the sun... You are not of the same position as the sun.”⁵⁴ Such reverence for the sun contrasts with the poet-sun companionship in Thoreau’s *Walking*. The humility not to compete with god—the sun—is expressed in an architecture that makes the Gurensi compound impervious to the heavy rainstorms that come from the east during the rainy season. Rivers and streams vanish during the dry season. Amidst this grassy and seasonally changing landscape certain majestic baobab trees or clusters of trees and shrubs, streams, rocky ranges, or heaps of stones persevere and exert powerful presences. They are almost inevitably *tingana*.

A *tingane* might mark the location of settlement of the first ancestor—the pioneer settler and key ancestor of a village—or a powerful place identified by a soothsayer. Most of my informants described the *tindaana*—a Gurene shorthand for *tiṇa daana* i.e. “custodian” or “owner of the earth”—as the “original settler” of the land and emphasized the prominent role of his family in community life. The areas identified by the “original” settlers as places of sacrifice to the earth gods became the abodes for the spirits of the whole community. Three different types of earth gods can bear the name *tingane*: *yaaba-tia* (ancestral trees); *tingane* proper; and *tinkugere* (land stones or land spirits). The main god that serves the whole community is the *tinkugere*, a circle of stones arranged on the ground, usually without any trees around it.

The *tindaana* (earth custodian) holds custody of the *tinkugere*. In Bolgatanga, everyone who approaches the land spirits removes their shoes and upper body clothes. The removal zone can range from a radius of as little as ten to as many as forty or fifty barefoot paces from the circle of stones. Some elders trace this prohibition “back to

nature”: when their ancestors were alive, they were naked. This is why you take your shoes off—it is an “abomination” to keep them on.⁵⁵ In this same area, all articles of the *tindaana*’s regalia have to be made of nature-made materials such as sheep and goat skins and locally sourced plant fibers. The totality of these articles is vested with special powers; individual articles like bracelets might be where the spirit of a *tindaana*’s father resides. In some villages, horses and guns are prohibited from entering the domain of the *tinkugere* and the *tindaana*’s compound.



Gurensi Tinkugere

Clothing and bodily adornment can be seen as ecopolitical practices that reenact the resilience of community identities in contexts that increasingly include the influence of transnational forces, centralization, and commodity circulation. Struggles over the ways in which Northern Ghanaian bodies are dressed and presented are not new to Gurensiland. Early accounts of the encounters between local authorities and exotic commodities describe shreds of Mossi and European cloth hanging from trees on the approaches to earth shrines. For some Northern Ghanaians, it was the wearing of cloth—

identified with predatory slave-raiders—that embodied the hostile economies of the invader.⁵⁶ Today, throughout Northern Ghana, animal skins are the key political attribute of chiefs, a relatively new “traditional” office consolidated by the British colonial administration. Skins become the materials that re-distribute political and spiritual powers. Wrapping skins around a *tindaana*’s body connects him spiritually and materially to the hunting bodies of the ancestors and to the land. Every time an ensemble of skins is laid down for a chief’s cushions to be placed on it, the history of assimilation of such powers by new ruling elites is reiterated and reproduced.⁵⁷

A body adorned only with animal skins also emphasizes the importance of bodily comportment and receptivity to *tiŋa*, itself conceived as a set of spiritual practices rather than as raw material for conceptualization or land development. The skins always generated lively debates during my discussions with Gurensi elders. *Tingane* is derived from *tiŋa* (land or earth) and *gane* (skin), insisted some elders, the latter being a reference to the earth priest’s bodily adornment. Others interpreted *gane* as a reference to “the skin of the earth,” the delicate womb of a woman in which we are all buried. Taking your shoes off ensures that you tread gently on *tiŋa*’s delicate skin, signaling a posture of humility and respect for the earth. Such respect is also manifest in the taboo against lighting a fire on the *tiŋa*. The earth does not belong to humans but humans belong to the earth. It is to her womb that everyone returns upon death, dissolving lived hierarchies: “You may have an ancestor, I might have an ancestor, he may have his ancestors, they are all contained in the womb of the woman. That is the *tiŋa*... We are all within the same place. So it is somebody who takes care of our ancestors.”⁵⁸

The *tingane* becomes an image of the earth's productivity, fertility, and regenerative powers. The womb of the earth is where the seeds co-sown by the earth gods and the Gurensi farmer sprout to life:

When a man sleeps with a woman it is their belief that the woman didn't just drink water to get pregnant. The man slept with the woman but the gods also intervened. If it doesn't rain, the crops would not fruit...if he doesn't sleep with her she won't give birth and *tiŋa* would not go well (*tiŋa ka maale*). If it doesn't rain, *tiŋa ka maale*, if a man doesn't sleep with a woman she wouldn't give birth.⁵⁹

Fertility comes "when a man sleeps with a woman," when the sky god gives rain to the earth and the earth gives birth to the trees that spring in the *tingane*. "The woman is a womb. If you bury a human being in the grave it means a child in the woman's womb. It is very important that the womb contains the dead."⁶⁰ The intimate intercourse between living, dead, and unborn, between the organic and the inorganic, binds together human fertility, health, and rainfall in a web that is more than metaphorical. The *tinkugere* ensures that the community partakes in the earth's capacities to regenerate life. It re-activates deceased matter into the ecological becoming of the earth: the decomposition of a living body is simultaneously the composition of a life, the assembling of the dead body's parts into new vegetal and mineral relations.

"Yes," the elders concur, "the *tinkugere* is a woman in the Zoko and Sirigu areas."⁶¹ But here *tingane* comes from *tiŋa* and *gaŋe* (literally "exceed" or "surpass, be more than something"). The *tingane* is a god; it "sends the sacrifice to god because that is the one which is nearer to the supreme, to the creator."⁶² The *tiŋa* surpasses all others.⁶³ The *tingane* takes blood because blood is life and that is what the ancestors do not have. You want the ancestors to know that you have sacrificed a whole animal and what color the animal was—that's why you put the feathers on the blood. A red fowl is sacrificed to

avert a serious problem, a white fowl to give thanks, a black fowl to deal with something hidden or gloomy. The community needs fowls of all colors to respond to unanticipated events and seasonal changes. This can be also understood as a way to eat a variety of foods, conserve resources, and protect biodiversity.

Biodiversity and regeneration are also stimulated through a series of taboos. Cutting or gathering wood for fuel is either prohibited or restricted to certain species of trees and time of the year. Planting exotic trees or hunting the animals living there—“the children of the *tingane*”—is also forbidden and offenders face strong punishments. Such taboos extend beyond the confines of the *tingane* and organize relations of extended families and clans with totemic animals, plants, and objects. Some such relations involve the return of the ancestors into trees, animals, and objects: into pythons, spiders, domestic dogs, foot rings, anklets, bracelets, or even articles of the regalia of chiefs and *tindaanas*. In Zoko-Kadare and Zoko-Tarongo killing or hunting crocodiles is taboo: when someone dies he or she turns into a crocodile. Other totems concern long-term family relationships with animals that saved an ancestor.⁶⁴ Such totemic relationships exceed Thoreau’s relational goods of kindredship or “proof-sheets” of nature’s contribution to economy, though they too function to connect people to eco-systems. Clans and extended families share responsibility for the spiritual and physical well-being of all co-inhabitants of the *tiŋa*. These are relations of co-dependency and alliances forged through the recognition that the survivability of species is intertwined.

The key feature of this community economy is the non-market system of exchange. This is sometimes a ritual exchange of animal blood and human life: “the spirits take blood because, for example, when a witch gets someone they take the

person's blood, just that we humans do not see it with our eyes but the spirits do. So this is why the spirit too takes blood of the animals in exchange to save the person's soul."⁶⁵ Other forms of exchange include: daily exchange of greetings, courtesies, entertainment, and music; "exchange of seeds, exchange of food, exchange of children, even in marriage...strengthening the bond between two families by creating a marriage between their children"; labor-pooling processes that involve setting aside days when people go to work on each others' farms or assist each other with building a new compound.⁶⁶ It is not only individuals but groups—families, clans, gods, and spirits—that carry on such exchanges, often mediated by the *tindaana*, the soothsayer (*baga*), the chief of medicine (*bagenabasɔ*), or the chief (*naba*). The things that are exchanged are not exclusively goods, property, or objects of economic value.⁶⁷ Neither is the purpose "mere subsistence," for the act of giving creates social relationships and re-distributes the surplus that has been co-produced by gods, spirits, and humans. This is an economy of relationships and sufficiency, in which "wealth can be identified, not in objects or in purchasing power but in the level of integration of people in their natural and spiritual environment, in the quality of their relationships with the society around them."⁶⁸ A farmer's family is rich if it has a large network of mutual aid, ancestral support, and reciprocity on which family members can count. Within such relational economies, "profitability includes the long term, the creation of relationships, exchange, and the conservation of the environment."⁶⁹ These economies resonate with Thoreau's poetic economy, in which wealth is also derived from the richness of human entanglements with kindred earthly bodies and forces: "Love your life, poor as it is... The setting sun is reflected from the windows of the alms-house as brightly as from the rich man's

abode...Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul.”⁷⁰ For Thoreau, wealth lies in the bodily intensification and poetic amplification of the productivity and wealth already present in nature. Wealth is not generated first and foremost through the “goods” of Thoreau’s labor in the bean-field but through the sensations that such labor elicits and intensifies within the rich mix of the poet’s “inner nature.”

It is, in contrast, the non-living—the ancestors and the earth gods—who are the real sources and owners of wealth in Gurensiland. While Thoreau’s poetic custody privileges individuality, earth priests are land trustees in the sense that they are responsible for addressing the spiritual needs of the land and the community spirits. In many parts of Gurensiland earth priests are “nature-chosen”: the *tindaana* is selected by the spirits of the ancestors and not by his age, wisdom, wealth, or status. It is the “skin,” the shrine itself, that serves as the repository of ownership of the land, not the person of the *tindaana*. The *tinkugere*’s heap of stones entails a particular form of ordering and enclosing the *tiŋa*—*spiritual or ritual enclosure*—bound up with ancestral presences, a cluster of clans and natural forces. Like Thoreau’s poem, a spiritual enclosure is relational and non-possessive in the narrow economic sense. Unlike the poem, which has “fenced,” “impounded” and “milked” the land, Gurensi enclosure is a two-way reciprocal street. It is essential to take care of the earth’s spiritual needs so that the earth continues to nurture her inhabitants. For Thoreau, apprehension of the land amounts to a set of lived strategies that reside most fully within the human domain. For the Gurensi, humans constitute merely one node in a field of apprehension and transformation of landscapes; the ancestors (i.e. the earth) embody this apprehension for reasons that humans can only try to interpret.⁷¹ After all, the landowners themselves are enclosed in the womb of the

tiŋa: “everything comes from the ground. Our crops, the deceased are buried there, everything is contained in the *tiŋa*.”⁷² The ancestors have a vested interest in the land and their consent has to be obtained by the *tindaana* before land is given to a land seeker or a deceased person is buried. Thoreau, on the other hand, does not seek such consent from the escaped slaves, Irish workers, and deceased Native Americans who continue to haunt his cabin at Walden and the local woods. He attempts to live less as his European ancestors and more through “the Indian” example that mediates his relationship to the land.⁷³ The substitution of one set of ancestors for another loosens up his appropriative tendencies but hardly alters his pioneering sense of entitlement to settle there. In contrast, clearance from the Gurensi *tingane* is needed for development, even if building a new school or a hospital means that the earth gods themselves have to move to another abode within the *tiŋa*.

The centrality of this economy of non-market exchange to Gurensi everyday life does not mean that it ever existed in a pure or uncontaminated state. Markets have been known to people for centuries and this familiarity is incorporated into a different type of clock—the “market” clock—which is used to reckon time according to the three-day market cycle in Gurensiland. A visit to the bustling Bolga market on market day (*daa daare*) highlights how market exchange has been refashioned by and, in turn, shapes the community economy. Price considerations and economic calculus co-exist and compete with barter and relationship-based transactions. Early encounters between communities and commodity circulation were recorded onto the skin of the *tiŋa*, shaping the earthen designs of compounds and the birth of some *tingana*. The construction of a low entrance and flat roof of the female room (*denyana*) was a way of fortifying the compound against

Dagomba and Mossi slave-raids, and later British invaders. During such slave-raids and wars, victims' bodies were dumped in thick forests, rivers, and caves, some of which would be later identified as *tingana*. Sometimes a tree may be petitioned for assistance against the raiders: "We are going to war. If you are able to help us and we win and defeat our enemies then we will give you this.' So that tree is able to help them. So that can form a *tingane*.'"74

Such encounters with predatory markets for Northern Ghanaian bodies have transformed social lives, identities, and the stories of founding ancestors. They have generated flows of bodily movements within and across the *tiŋa*: "Now the key difficulty we need to unravel is: who was there first? And has that been disturbed by the slave raiding?...who came first is what determines who has control over the land."75 The question of land haunts people's lives today as climate change re-sets local clocks and dries up spiritually powerful rivers, as zinc replaces grass for roofing and Christianity advances a "cheaper" form of worship than traditional sacrifice ("when you are praying direct to God you don't pay anything"), relocating the source of spiritual power away from the natural world.76 The spiritual enclosures of the earth custody resonate and interpenetrate with the enclosed commons of modern leasehold, now a common means of transferring land: "we are trying to match unlike things—pouring water into petrol and thinking that the mix can be good. You know, it won't work. We do not have a pure market system economy...Go to the village and you'll see that although there is some level of penetration by the market, there are those informal arrangements which still exist and upon which people survive."77

As land appreciates, some chiefs have rushed to endorse transfers of land interest, resolve land disputes, and lay claim to the ground rent, which accrues constitutionally to the allodial owner of the land.⁷⁸ In contrast to earth priests' privileged relationship with the spirits of the land, chiefs have tended to base such claims upon their authority to "administer the people" who inhabit that land. These practices interact with customary tenancies, licenses, and the use of land for farming and residential building by landowning clans and families who hold the customary right to pass that land to the next generation.⁷⁹ Land boundary demarcations using trees, rivers, and rocks compete with site plans. Some trees such as shea nut become "economic" trees while others remain communal resources. Taboos against cutting the trees in the *tingane* become relaxed by Christian converts who have been told in church that nothing will happen if they encroach upon the earth gods. In Bolgatanga, earth priests have formed an association to address such challenges to their office, whose survival can only be ensured if people continue to feel bound together by the local ethos of earth spirituality. The association has embraced Western terminologies of land titles, individuals, and ownership in an attempt to master the art of "pouring water into petrol," aiming to render the *tindaana*-ship legible and amenable to the fiscal, legal, and cadastral terms of neoliberal development. This might eventually shift power differentials in favor of markets, humans, and the living. In the meantime, modern leasehold and the "purchase of land" continue to be treated as "kola money," and such transfers are equated with customary forms of compensation that do not alienate the land from its original custodian no matter the amount involved. Gurensi *tiŋa* continues to absorb Western vectors even as the invisible hand of the liberal market today "is both crushed and recuperated by

communitarian embraces.”⁸⁰ Everything becomes contained in the *tiŋa*, be it land markets or local economies of living together in extended families of spirits, humans, gods, plants, animals, and minerals.

Can political theory enrich our understanding of the changing role of the *tindaanas* in the face of politico-economic transformations in Ghana? My emphasis on bodily comportment has sought to highlight the actual use of beliefs in contexts where familiar distinctions such as religious/secular and living/dead become untenable. Is it even appropriate to reduce the rich chronicles of Gurensi lived experience to “beliefs?” What is at stake in the distinction between experiences of the earth as a supernatural being and as ancestors/elders? Should we employ the abstract category of “agents” for the ancestors, as if they were autonomous entities “within” nature?⁸¹ The conversation between Thoreau and the earth priest highlights the limits and dangers of an enduring tendency to import Western models of economy, politics, religion, and personhood in order to comprehend the lifeworlds of others. It makes a difference whether the food given to the *tingane* is described in terms of “paying tribute” and “respect” to the eldest “elders” or in terms of “ancestor worship.” The former description situates the ancestors (i.e. the earth) within politics and within a continuum of intergenerational eldership that forms the foundations of Gurensi political authority. The latter removes them from politics and re-locates them within religion and cult because we, Westerners, find these domains more appropriate to our own dealings with the dead.⁸² Honoring the ways in which the Gurensi people “model” their livelihoods requires that we recognize both the authority of the earth in politico-economic life and the role of the *tindaana*-ship as a mechanism of re-distribution of political power between the living and the dead (rather

than treating the it as a loose network of fetish priests or religious functionaries). The *tindaana*-ship ensures that development proceeds in accord with the ever-changing spiritual needs and “invisible governances” of the earth. Religion in places like Northern Ghana can be also understood as a set of political experimentations within people’s spiritual, economic, and social lifeworlds.⁸³

The idea that the “ancestors” must be separated from the living “elders” belongs to a medley of ethnocentric convictions that shape neocolonial representations of indigenous peoples’ relationships to the land as mere subsistence or occupancy rather than as competing—albeit different—forms of property and ownership. African farmers are assumed to have no prior “investment” in the land—especially in conservation practices such as rotation of fallows—because African practices do not approximate those of their Western counterparts in the cornfields of Iowa or the greenhouses of the Netherlands. The former produce to live; the latter live to produce.⁸⁴ The absence of physical marking or signs of transformation of the land through “improvement”—like Thoreau’s Indian who was not fully able to “redeem the meadow”—renders such lands “unused” and ready to be grabbed by contemporary pioneers. The dialogue between Thoreau and the Gurensi exposes familiar Western imaginaries of economy as culturally specific phenomena that enter into processes of contestation and hybridization with competing imaginaries. According to the latter, “land” can be felt as something more than a durable surface over which generation after generation transfer communal rights. Such commons can be experienced as a web of socio-ecological relationships between humans and the earth; and they are nonetheless relationships of property. In Thoreau’s America, the sphere of “economy,” unlike politics, looms so large that the poet cannot walk away

from it. In Gurensiland, economy as such hardly exists: a political continuum of eldership continues to draw ecology, economy, and theology together, making it difficult to clearly demarcate one “sphere” from the others.

THE EARTH PRIEST AND THE POET

These collisions and resonances bring to light the ways in which Gurensi eco-theology and Thoreau’s ecopolitical imaginary might enrich each other. Thoreau constructs a carefully modulated relation to the Wild, and the Gurensi to the *tingane*. Both involve a heightened sense of receptivity to the powers of the earth over processes of ethical will formation. Thoreau seeks experiences that enchant the senses anew, disrupting the habitual order of perception. One begins to experience familiar entities in new ways: “Life consists with wildness...One who pressed forward incessantly and never rested from his labors, who grew fast and made infinite demands on life, would always find himself in a new country or wilderness, and surrounded by the raw material of life.”⁸⁵ For Thoreau, each walk outside is also a journey inward through the fecund mix of the wild and the familiar that forms one’s personal interior. The Wild is de-placed and is more portable than the *tingane*, which is attached to a specific, multi-dimensional territory and is bound to the non-linear history of the clan or the village.

In the Gurensi *tiŋa*, there is hardly room for Thoreau’s Wild. *Tiŋa* refers to: 1) land, ground, earth, the physical world; 2) country, town, settlement.⁸⁶ *Tiŋa* is the whole community, be it trees, stones, humans, or spirits; it is the ground on which we are sitting

and “in which we bury.”⁸⁷ You cannot have “wild” Nature without the settlement or vice versa.

The *tingane* illustrates the translatability of any mode of existence into any other within the *tiŋa*, which is to say that humans, bats, stones, and gods perpetually transform. A human turned into a baobab tree and a god who resides in a stone bear the same name: my grandfather, my ancestor, my *yaaba*. The time someone spent as a tree and the time someone spent as a human belong to the same lineage, a relation that takes the form of an identity between what might be considered two dissimilar species of things. The *tingane* is a web of lived relationships with the earth that provides people with good harvests, food, and more people and which, in turn, is given food, protection, and respect. The *tingane* is not a god prior to those relationships but through those relationships in a world of multiple gods and becoming that is not separate from humans. Only the sky god (*wine*) is outside *tiŋa*, but he cannot be worshipped directly; the Creator can be only petitioned through *tiŋa*’s intercourse with the sky, which brings forth rain, fertility, and new *tingana*.

This web of immanent lived relationships contrasts with Thoreau’s *as if* stance of transcendence that prompts him to re-experience himself as if he is “part and parcel of Nature.” Through a series of everyday economic practices, Thoreau becomes enchanted by the earthly forces and wild elements that course around and through his body-economy. Rather than seeking to tame these elements in order to consolidate himself as a consummate human agent, Thoreau valorizes the disruptive effects of these encounters upon the normal, default self: “We need the tonic of wildness,-to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadowhen lurk... We need to witness our own limits

transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander.”⁸⁸ The sensuous attractiveness and unruliness of these forces serves as a counterforce to human habits, and as an impetus to transcend, to go beyond, and to enact “higher laws.” Thoreau’s transgressive transcendence is about lines of flight, about crossings over to a heteroverse of the Wild: “If the day and the night are such that you greet them with joy, and life emits a fragrance like flowers and sweet-scented herbs, is more elastic, more starry, more immortal,-that is your success. All nature is your congratulation, and you have cause momentarily to bless yourself.”⁸⁹ This practice of transcending carries with it a certain enchantment and momentum that resonate with Gurensi sacrifice and ritual, which also opens access to a different, uncanny state of knowing and encountering nature. Not everyone in Gurensiland has the *tindaana*’s or soothsayer’s privileged access to the sacred. Not everyone in Concord shares Thoreau’s impetus to recraft a body through metaphors such as the high, the immortal, the starry, and the transcendental.

However, most farmers in Gurensiland are connected to this spiritual realm of nature through lived experience, worship, and various taboos. Ritual also affords an interruption and slowing down of Chrono-time that resonates with Thoreau’s morning exercises: “Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness...My days were not days of the week, bearing the stamp of any heathen deity, nor were they minced into hours and fretted by the ticking of a clock.”⁹⁰ The suspension of Chronos tunes human bodies in to an earth clock that reckons time by events and phenomena rather than mathematics. Such events

are experienced as ecological actions in relation to other events, moving and transforming energies, blood, nutrients, sound refrains, sensibilities, and sunrays.

Besides such shared moments of dwelling in uncanny experiences that puncture linear time, Thoreau and the earth priest front the Wild and the *tingane* differently. While Thoreau *transcends*, the earth priest *petitions*. Each practice of an eco-economy involves shifting back and forth between different registers of passivity and activity. However, it makes a difference whether the site where agency is re-distributed between human and earthen economy-makers lies in the soil marked by a circle of stones or in a poem.

The poet is both cultivated and wild, given and made, and his cultivation depends on his ability to construct himself as an object, which is then subjected to various tactics of experimentation. By a “conscious effort of the mind” we can become “spectators” of our bodies, which allows us to negotiate our capacities for experience and observation, our roles as both subjects and objects.⁹¹ Here, being both subject and object or the “scene” of thoughts and affections is not quite the same as being the site of various earth forces. This doubleness “makes us poor neighbors and friends sometimes” as it encourages us to see Thoreau’s rabbit, lake, and bird neighbors as potentially instrumentalizable. However, it is this “spectator” quality that enables Thoreau to keep the Wild at bay in order to maintain a proper relation between our instinct for wildness and our “higher” instincts: “As I came home through the woods...I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw...I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both.”⁹² The spectator

renders Thoreau more agentic so that he loosens up the will to mastery over the earthen forces that his body draws in. Ironically, Thoreau's "higher" instinct is employed in the service of greater cooperation with nonhumans rather than for the purposes of rank-ordering. This self-conscious chronicler of data and of a heightened degree of human agency constitutes only one dimension of the (inter-)subjectivity through which Thoreau engages the rest of the world. Multiple modes of subjectivity extend from natural and cosmic processes to Thoreau's body and vice versa: "What is man but a mass of thawing clay?...The fingers and toes flow to their extent from the thawing mass of the body. Who knows what the human body would expand and flow out to under a more genial heaven?"⁹³ Self-making (auto-poiesis) is a project of producing a fine-tuned earthbound body out of two, interwoven sets of materials: the first are the dull, conventional tendencies that have settled into one's bones and habits, and the second are the more lively processes of nonhuman nature. Both sets are operative within the individual.

In the context of ecological degradation that affects Gurensiland today, can Thoreau's "doubleness" and his use of the nature/culture problematic equip the Gurensi people with new crisis-coping mechanisms? The "spectator" could allow the Gurensi to distance themselves from the immediacy of lived experience so that they can register as earth-degrading certain everyday practices whose ecological consequences are deferred in time. In this way, the sea of black polythene bags that engulf the land or the use of pesticides such as DDT or Aldrin could be perceived as things that puncture the womb of the earth rather than as modern-day enhancements of people's ongoing relationship with the *tiŋa*. Consumer goods, modernization, and ancestral knowledge could be seen as

contradicting or undermining each other rather than as part and parcel of *tinga*'s productive economy.

On the other hand, as the Gurensi learn from Thoreau, what Thoreau felt ambivalent about becomes more conspicuous. For Thoreau, a self-governing body-economy cannot be actualized without establishing a proper relationship to the Wild. This relationship tends to be one of ability, activity, sauntering. In *Walking* he walks west along with the pioneers, and the border of the Wild keeps receding back. The way the poet harmonizes human existence with nature in part renders natural the conquest of nature. This poetic crusade is productively troubled by a certain passivity, non-power and humility at the heart of the experience of *tingane*'s power. The *tindaana*'s role is to register the spiritual needs of the land and make them known to the whole community. He is a key intermediary between the living and the non-living: "the *yaabas* or the ancestors are scattered everywhere in the *tinga*...He will go around, consult the soothsayer to find out their needs...he does not own that land. He takes care of the bush land."⁹⁴ The possibility of sharing the non-power afforded by ritual with others becomes subjectivity-forming. It locates village residents within the womb of a woman rather than within the wild embrace of Nature or the domain of higher laws. Gurensi ethical formation involves a series of conversations and exchanges between extended families of humans, gods, earthen bodies, and spirits that affect each other through reciprocal (and asymmetrical) relationships rather than subject/object dynamics. These subjectivities are collective more-than-human assemblages: they transform into animals, plants, natural bodies such as rocks and ponds, and even cultural artifacts such as ancestral horns and rings, which participate alongside us in a community economy.

In poetic enclosures, ownership is vested in a poem. In spiritual enclosures, ownership is vested in a shrine, in a mineral body. Can the *tinkugere* be like the poem? I suspect not quite. The *tinkugere* is less a reference to the incorporation of the earth into the human ethical order and human thinking and more a set of living, negotiated practices that aim to attune this order and thinking to nature: “Our food is gotten from the *tiŋa*, our water is gotten from the *tiŋa*, our buildings are gotten from the *tiŋa*, almost everything that is made to make life comfortable is gotten from the *tiŋa*. And our ancestors are from the *tiŋa*... They are from the *tiŋa* because all the earth gods are on the *tiŋa*... Our life depends on the *tiŋa*, spiritually, socially, whatsoever.”⁹⁵ The earth does not have to be incorporated into the human, as these are already felt as inseparable. The earth simultaneously has a social, legal, economic, political, and spiritual authority that entitles her to rule Gurensiland by default: “everything that is done on this earth is done on the *tiŋa*.”⁹⁶ Thoreau also wants to say that Nature rules by default. However, his concept-mediated practices of active self-fashioning do not equip him with sufficient resources to relinquish the “human” as one who is never “wholly involved in Nature.”⁹⁷ The best he can do is to command that human part of the self to register Nature’s rule without submitting fully to it. But would full submission always mean submission to a human idea of nature? This is less clear. Perhaps the difficulty lies in another submission: that of philosophy to the influence of concepts such as agency and property that fail to capture the diversity and complexity of lived encounters between human bodies and a non-appropriable, life-generating earth.

While Thoreau privileges solitude above other competing modes of economic sociality, he underplays the role of human community, which is indispensable for Gurensi

ethical life. The dialogue between the two highlights the radically incomplete nature of the modern image of the human body as a self-enclosed “individual.” This image does not exhaust what it means to be human and its incompleteness prompts one to seek alliances with other bodies, be it ponds, spirits, human neighbors, crocodiles, or extraordinary stones. Thoreau acts as if he can exempt himself from public life, at least as long as such a polity does not include hawks, squirrels, ponds, etc. In Gurensiland such exemptions are neither feasible nor even grammatically possible. The dialogue between the poet and the earth priest reveals that a body or a person is always more than itself: it is a composite of relations, events, and affections that bind humans and nonhumans into webs of kinship, solidarity, and reciprocity.

Theory and ethnography are two related modes of artistic production of effects upon such bodies or persons. The sensibilities and moods created by these practices of political thinking flow into one another. The idea is to allow the thick chronicles of lived experience that ethnography makes visible to affect us without recuperating them as Western philosophy. The earth priest’s supplicating can scrub Thoreau of his troubled (and troubling) relationship to Western progress. It can transform him into a poet who has given up on the romantic fantasy of the “Wild” and has embraced an ongoing and inescapable relationship to nature. Thoreau’s “doubleness” and nature/culture problematic, in turn, might help the Gurensi emerge as a fully complex ethical universe that is not in perfect harmony with nature either.

¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 90; John Updike, introduction to *Walden*, by Henry David Thoreau (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), ix-x.

² “America’s Literary Recluse,” *The Graphic*, July 14, 1917.

³ See Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁴ See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁵ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, introduction to *Archaeology of Violence*, by Pierre Clastres (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010), 25.

⁶ For a compelling discussion of the relationship between philosophy and ethnography see also Michael Jackson, *Lifeworlds: Essays in Existential Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁷ I borrow the term “economy-makers” from Arturo Escobar and his discussion of the diverse economies practiced by black agriculturalists in Tumaco, Colombia. See Arturo Escobar, *Territories of Difference: place, movements, life, redes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 100; I also draw inspiration from the geographers Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, who aim to reclaim economy as a site of everyday ethical practices, enacting new “body-economies” at the core of which is the negotiation of interdependence between humans and nonhumans. See J.K. Gibson-Graham and Gerda Roelvink, “An Economic Ethics for the Anthropocene” *Antipode* 41, no. S1 (January 2010): 320-346.

⁸ Thoreau, *Walden*, 137.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 320.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹² Here I draw from Jane Bennett’s definition of an actant: “an actant is a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has effectivity or sufficient coherence to produce effects or that make a difference or alter the course of events” (Jane Bennett, “The Solar Judgment of Walt Whitman” in *A Political Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. John E. Seery [The University Press of Kentucky, 2011], 134).

¹³ Thoreau, *Walden*, 42.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 81-82.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

²¹ This notion of trusteeship is borrowed from Gandhian economics, which advances a view of an economy based on needs instead of wants and on material self-sufficiency at the village level (*Swadeshi*). The key institution of the Gandhian economy is *trusteeship*, the nonviolent equivalent of ownership, which defines a person’s relation to possessions, including non-material properties and capacities. One is a trustee, not an owner, of possessions and has the right to use them as long as they are used for the good of society, which includes one’s own well-being (Michael Nagler, “The Wheel of Nonviolence: Gandhian Economics” [Lecture, University of California, Berkeley, August 2006]).

²² Thoreau, *Walden*, 82.

²³ *Ibid.*, 82-83.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 165-6.

²⁵ Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, “An Economic Ethics for the Anthropocene,” 329-30.

²⁶ Thoreau, *Walden*, 13.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 119-20.

²⁸ Serge Latouche, *Farewell to Growth* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2009), 70; Here I am also indebted to Schumacher’s illuminating analysis of the qualitative distinction between primary and secondary goods (See E. F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics As If People Mattered* [New York: Harper Perennial, 2010], 50-55) and to Thomas Princen’s, Michael Maniates’, and Ken Conca’s *Confronting Consumption* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002) which explores this idea of production as consumption.

²⁹ Henry David Thoreau, “A Winter Walk,” in *Collected Essays and Poems* (New York: The Library of America, 2001), 96.

³⁰ Humans might be omnivores but, according to Tim Luke, most participants in the economies of industrialized countries—the top third or half of the world chain—are essentially monivorous. As “petrovorousness” currently underpins the entire human food supply, the main food source is oil. See Timothy Luke, “An Exciting New Recipe: From Food as Waste to Eating as Economy,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, September 1-4, 2011.

³¹ Thoreau, “A Winter Walk,” 101.

³² *Ibid.*, 101, 105.

³³ *Ibid.*, 105.

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- ³⁴ Henry D. Thoreau, "Walking," in *Excursions* (Seaside, OR: Watchmaker Publishing, 2010), 93-94.
- ³⁵ "Politics is but a narrow field, and that still narrower highway yonder leads to it. I sometimes direct the traveler thither. If you would go to the political world, follow the great road,—follow that market-man, keep his dust in your eyes, and it will lead you straight to it; for it, too, has its place merely, and does not occupy all space. I pass from it as from a bean-field into the forest, and it is forgotten." (Thoreau, "Walking," 98).
- ³⁶ Thoreau, "Walking," 117. See also James Martel, *Love is a Sweet Chain: Desire, Autonomy, and Friendship in Liberal Political Theory* (London: Routledge, 2001), 149-50.
- ³⁷ Martel, *Love is a Sweet Chain*, 154.
- ³⁸ Thoreau, "Walking," 103.
- ³⁹ Thoreau, "Walking," 103; Martel, *Love is a Sweet Chain*, 158.
- ⁴⁰ Thoreau, "Walking," 110; Martel, *Love is a Sweet Chain*, 150-2.
- ⁴¹ Thoreau, *Walden*, 158-9.
- ⁴² Martel, *Love is a Sweet Chain*, 186. My reading of Thoreau in this section is also indebted to my personal discussions with Jane Bennett and James Martel.
- ⁴³ Thoreau, *Walden*, 161.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 155, 157.
- ⁴⁶ Hoeing beans reveals cultivation as a form of consumption of the earth's wealth, as a set of degrading behaviors: clearing, harvesting, and ingesting. See Thomas Princen, "Consumption and Its Externalities," in *Confronting Consumption*, eds. Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates, and Ken Conca (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 31.
- ⁴⁷ James Scott. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 13.
- ⁴⁸ Thoreau, *Walden*, 166.
- ⁴⁹ For Connolly's insightful reading of Nietzsche's call to spiritualization of enmity, see William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 28-29. See also Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 53-54.
- ⁵⁰ Hoeing beans is a process of mutual learning, co-transformation: "It was no longer beans that I hoed, nor I that hoed beans" (Thoreau, *Walden*, 158-9). Cultivation is experienced as a temporary suspension of subject-object relationships in favor of a kindredship of economy-makers. This experiential knowledge becomes incorporated into Thoreau's future thought and action, allowing him to minimize the degrading behaviors of food cultivation.
- ⁵¹ See V. Spike Peterson, *A Critical Rewriting of the Global Political Economy: Integrating Reproductive, Productive, and Virtual Economies* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 82.
- ⁵² David Millar, "Improving Farming with Ancestral Support," in *Ancient Roots, New Shoots: Endogenous Development in Practice*, eds. Bertus Haverkort, Katrien van't Hooft, and Wim Hiemstra (London: ZED Books, 2003).
- ⁵³ Patrick Adongo and Nancy Schaefer, "Notes on the Frafra Time System," in *Time and the Calendar in Some Ghanaian Languages*, ed. Tony Naden (Ligon: Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, 1996), 20.
- ⁵⁴ Gurensi house builders, interview by Anatoli Ignatov and Jacqueline Ignatova, January 6, 2013.
- ⁵⁵ Gurensi elders, in discussion with Anatoli Ignatov and Jacqueline Ignatova, January 7, 2013.
- ⁵⁶ Jean Allman and John Parker, *Tongnaab: The History of a West African God* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 61-62.
- ⁵⁷ Fred T. Smith, "Frafra Dress," *African Arts* 15, no. 3 (May 1982): 38.
- ⁵⁸ Chris Azaare, interview by Anatoli Ignatov and Jacqueline Ignatova, Gowrie, March 3, 2013. A mother/earth/womb natalism of this kind is very complex and full of contradictions. Its egalitarian representations can hardly conceal the patriarchal nature of actual gender practices within the Gurensi system of patrilineal descent and primogeniture. Under this system of succession, the general rule is that upon death a man's office and property devolve on his eldest son or his eldest son's eldest male descendant. If the eldest son has died leaving no male offspring, the next son or his eldest male descendant inherits and so on. For instance, the *tindaana*-ship is a hereditary office. Because the selection of the *tindaana* in many villages is done by the ancestors and the earth gods, women are technically not disqualified from such

appointments. However, appointments of female *tindaanas* seem to be very rare. When a woman is selected as a *tindaana* she does not perform sacrifices to the *tingane* directly but rather through a male descendant. Thus, the “earth as womb” natalism and the respected status of ancestresses should not obscure such common tendencies to experience the spiritual enclosures of the land as patriarchal “commons.”

⁵⁹ Interview with elders, December 14, 2012.

⁶⁰ Azaare, interview, March 03, 2013.

⁶¹ Discussion with elders, January 7, 2013.

⁶² Interview with elders, December 14, 2012

⁶³ Azaare, interview, March 03, 2013.

⁶⁴ The ancestor of a founding clan in Zoko-Kadare was a hunter who “got lost in the forest and the monkey directed him” (Interview with elders, December 14, 2012).

⁶⁵ Interview with informant by Anatoli Ignatov and Jacqueline Ignatova, December 16, 2012. Witches can be also a serious signal of some of the questionable gender practices mentioned earlier, or more generally, of scapegoating, even if the latter is not necessarily gender-based. An exposition of these issues, however, is beyond the scope of this essay.

⁶⁶ Bakari Nyari, Interview by Anatoli Ignatov and Jacqueline Ignatova, Tamale, February 13, 2013.

⁶⁷ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2011).

⁶⁸ Emmanuel Seni N'Dione et al., “Reinventing the Present: The Chodak Experience in Senegal,” in *The Post-Development Reader*, eds. Majid Rahnema and Victoria Bawtree (London: Zed Books, 1997), 369.

⁶⁹ N'Dione et al., “Reinventing the Present,” 376.

⁷⁰ Thoreau, *Walden*, 328-9.

⁷¹ Elizabeth Povinelli, “Do Rocks Listen? The Cultural Politics of Apprehending Australian Aboriginal Labor,” *American Anthropologist* 97, no. 3 (September 1995): 513.

⁷² Azaare, Interview, March 3, 2013.

⁷³ Martel, *Love is a Sweet Chain*, 170-1.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Nyari, interview, February 13, 2013.

⁷⁶ Interview with elders by Anatoli Ignatov, Jacqueline Ignatov, and Chris Azaare, October 13, 2012.

⁷⁷ Bakari Nyari, interview by Cecilia Lynch, Jacqueline Ignatova and Anatoli Ignatov, Tamale, September 1, 2012.

⁷⁸ The allodial title is held to be the “ultimate” or highest customary title to land in Ghana and is subject only to limitations and obligations imposed by the general laws of the country. The title refers to a customary interest in land that is essentially communal—vested in a stool, skin, clan or family—and established through discovery and first settlement and sometimes conquest. The contemporary difficulty of ascertaining allodial ownership is an outcome of a long history of migration, slave-raiding, the indirect rule advanced by the British colonial administration, transformations of customary law, and the land management and acquisition policies of the government of Ghana. A watershed event occurred in 1979 when Article 80 of the new Constitution handed back land in the North (that had been held in trust by the government) to its “traditional owners,” opening up possibilities for *tindaana*, families, and chiefs to realign their positions. See Christian Lund, *Local Politics and the Dynamics of Property in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁷⁹ These collisions render visible markets, property, and ownership as plural, incomplete, and relational rather than as exclusive, rule-based, and alienating. The Gurensi customary land tenure system can be characterized as the coexistence of multiple bundles of rights and layers of interests in property that are often held by different persons or groups of persons. For instance, major land tenure interests in the Bolgatanga area include: *yizuo/yire tinga* (allodial ownership), ancestral lands that are “handed down to clans/families to utilize for their survival on behalf of the ancestors and those yet unborn” and are administered by clan and family heads (*yizukeenduma/yidaanduma*) in consultation with the *tindaana*; *tingambisi tinga* (usurfactory interest), the lands of indigenes used for farming and residential building, to which they can grant lesser interests to *saama* (migrants) and other Tingambisi on tenancy basis in consultation with the *yidaana*, *yizukeema* and ultimately the *tindaana*; “*tinga da'a*” (“purchase of land”), the lease-transfer of land interest by the landowner to another person for a period of time (usually 99 years for residential purposes and 25-50 years for commercial purposes), upon expiration of which the land reverts to the original owner; *kua zi'am sakere* (customary tenancies), the release of a plot of land to a

tenant to farm on for a relatively short period, usually a farming season; *tingda 'areka*, short-term grants or licenses for irrigation farming during the dry-season; *tingana*, restricted lands believed to be the abodes of the earth gods which are accessed by the *tindaana* and representatives of various clans for spiritual purposes; *yorh tinga* (burial land), controlled by the respective clans and families (The Project Secretariat of the ACLP, "Report on the Pilot Phase of Ascertainment and Codification of Customary Law on Land and Family in Ghana" [National House of Chiefs/Law Reform Commission, March 2011], 276-88).

These bundles of rights and interests are significantly less exclusive than what we would normally associate with the terms "ownership" and "property." A rich collection of micro-histories of the struggles over land and property in Ghana has documented that these struggles are as much about the scope, construction, and negotiation of collective identities and public authority as they are about access to "resources" (See Sara Berry, *Chiefs Know Their Boundaries: Essays on Property, Power, and the Past in Asante*, 1896-1996 [Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001]; Carola Lentz, *Ethnicity and the Making of History in Northern Ghana* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006]; Christian Lund, *Local Politics and the Dynamics of Property in Africa* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008]). Where access to land depends more on nonmarket criteria, local histories, and communal identities and less on cash accumulation, property is better understood as a network of social relations that is continually negotiated and renegotiated by groups of people rather than autonomous individuals (Berry, *Chiefs Know Their Boundaries*, xxii).

⁸⁰ Hassan Zaoual, "The Economy and Symbolic Sites of Africa," in *The Post-Development Reader*, eds. M. Rahnema and V. Bawtree (London: Zed Books, 1997), 37.

⁸¹ These questions have been raised by anthropologists like Steve Gudeman in contemporary debates about cultural economy, especially with regard to the practices of sharing in modern hunter-gatherers societies. See Nurit Bird-David, "Beyond 'The Original Affluent Society': A Culturalist Reformulation," *Current Anthropology* 33, no. 1 (February 1992): 25-47.

⁸² Here I am indebted to Igor Kopytoff's analysis of the assumptions that shape a large body of anthropological literature about ancestor worship in Africa. See Igor Kopytoff, "Ancestors as Elders in Africa," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 41, no. 2 (April 1971): 129-142.

⁸³ David Hecht and Maliqalim Simone, *Invisible Governance: The Art of African Micropolitics* (New York: Autonomedia, 1994).

⁸⁴ Clastres, *Archaeology of Violence*, 197.

⁸⁵ Thoreau, "Walking," 108.

⁸⁶ Kropp Dakubu, Awinkene Arintono, and Avea Nsoh, *Gurene - English Dictionary* (Legon: Linguistics Department, University of Ghana, 2007), 170.

⁸⁷ Chris Azaare, Interview by Anatoli Ignatov and Jacqueline Ignatova, Gowrie, August 15, 2012.

⁸⁸ Thoreau, *Walden*, 317-8.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 216-7.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 111-2.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 134-5.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 210.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 307.

⁹⁴ Chris Azaare, interview, March 3, 2013.

⁹⁵ Interview with informants by Anatoli Ignatov and Jacqueline Ignatova, March 1, 2013.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Thoreau, *Walden*, 134-5.

Chapter 3

The Earth as a Gift-Giving Ancestor: Nietzsche's Perspectivism and African Animism



Ancestral tree (tingane)

Why they perform sacrifices to those trees? Probably, you are sitting under the tree...maybe without the tree knowing or without you knowing...you are seeking for help and you are thinking: "how do I get this? How do I get this?" And when you get it you may think, you may be aware that it is the tree that has given you that assistance. Maybe, after a consultation the soothsayer says that the tree you sat has given you that thing. You come and tell the blessings that the tree has given you..."let me also give it a gift." That's where the gift normally starts: performing sacrifices to some of the trees.

GURENSI CHIEF, *In Discussion with Author*

The figs fall from the trees, they are good and sweet; and as they fall, their red skin ruptures. I am a north wind to ripe figs.

Thus, like figs, these teachings fall to you, my friends: now drink their juice and their sweet flesh! It is autumn all around and pure sky and afternoon.

See what fullness is around us! And from such superabundance it is beautiful to look out upon distant seas.

Once people said God when they gazed upon distant seas; but now I have taught you to say: overman...

Not you yourselves perhaps, my brothers! But you could recreate yourselves into fathers and forefathers of the overman: and this shall be your best creating!

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

THE TREE AND THE GIFT

The elder led us to a lonely baobab tree by the entrance of the chief's compound. This tree, the elder explained, is one of the ancestors (*yaaba*). See the strip of cloth draped around the tree? The *yaaba* requested a smock—a traditional hand-woven dress worn by men in Northern Ghana—as a gift for the tree's assistance and blessings. How does one know what the tree wants? By asking the soothsayer: "the tree is saying that you have to perform sacrifices to it. Give me a goat or a cow...give me a shirt or a smock. So you have to... You know, you cannot buy a big smock to put on so you have to give something that signifies that that is the smock."¹ When the Gurensi make such offerings, the ancestors, in return, deliver prosperity, riches, children, and good harvests. When the ancestors are disgruntled, however, the signs of their adversity become visible everywhere: crop blights, droughts, soil infertility, and diseases. Ancestral performance propels a community economy in which production is best understood as co-production or as a set of social relationships with the land organized around gift exchange. The tree gives to the farmers, the farmers to the earth priest, and the earth priest to the *tingane*. The land's abundance and fertility reflect the moods, sensibilities, and strategies of the *yaabas*: society is healthy when the *yaabas* are well-disposed.² The giving earth, trees, animals, and minerals are forefathers—elders with extraordinary powers—who reciprocate with humans as kin. Nature's abundance and biodiversity are responses to the people's treatment of its wealth as a gift.

Whether by talking with trees or merging cycles of gift giving with the cycles of nature, Gurensi practices of exchange resonate with many of the intuitions of Nietzsche's Zarathustra. After a ten-year stay in the mountains Zarathustra re-enters the human world in response to the crisis of nihilism and the inability of human beings to "overcome themselves." Full of love, friendship, and a spirit of gift-giving sensibilities, the young Zarathustra brings to the world the overflow of wisdom gained in the mountains. He wants to share it with all, just as nature does: "like figs, these teachings fall to you, my friends: now drink their juice and their sweet flesh!" Zarathustra performs a gift-giving economy that draws on nature's excess: "See what fullness is around us! And from such superabundance it is beautiful to look out upon distant seas"³ This is a "steady-state" gift economy in the sense in which Herman Daly uses the term: an economy that at some point must cease growing and adapt itself to the dynamic equilibrium of natural processes.⁴ Zarathustra's generosity echoes and reiterates nature's generosity, and the outflow of his teachings is adapted to the metabolic flow of the gift-giving earth.

Zarathustra is a "north wind to ripe figs." Like the fertile womb of the Gurensi *tiŋa* (earth), ripe figs contain the seeds of wisdom and intergenerational change that the wind bestows upon the "fathers and forefathers of the overman." Zarathustra acts simultaneously as an ancestral and natural force. As the "north wind" he impersonates Wotan, the continental Germanic god of madness, intoxication, vegetation, oracles, and secret knowledge. Wotan has only one eye and carries a spear. The other eye was given up at the base of the World Ash Tree so that Wotan could drink from the stream of wisdom and break a branch from the tree to make his spear.⁵ Wotan is the turbulent movement after a long standstill or tension: like the sea levels that rise and break loose

after a century-long accumulation of greenhouse gases, Wotan's powers become manifest when things reach scorching one-sidedness.⁶ Thus Zarathustra's gifts are often *threshold* gifts, gifts that mark the *passage* from one state of equilibrium to another and that bestow new identities.⁷ Like the Gurensi earth priest and soothsayer, Zarathustra straddles multiple worlds at once. He communes with trees, snakes, and eagles. He crosses species boundaries and seeks to shift back and forth between the perspectives of people, animals, plants, and natural forces in order to forge new ecological relationships.

What if the earth were understood as a turbulent, gift-giving ancestor, and not only a material context for human action? In this chapter I stage another encounter between political theory and ethnography, this time between Nietzsche's perspectivism and a particular expression of "African animism." The goal is to present sustainable living not as an amended "lifestyle" but as a web of long-term interactions with the land. The mutuality of such cross-cultural encounters may transform both Western and African perspectives and diversify the resources available for contemporary environmental action. It may illuminate the question of living well within the earth's means. This question looms large today as Zarathustra's most powerful companions—the eagle and the lion—struggle to rebound from the endangered species list and the Gurensi *tingana* are being fenced in to become sites of biodiversity conservation.

Building on the treatment of economy as a more-than-human domain pursued in chapter 2, I explore Zarathustra's economy of gift giving in relation to the economies of reciprocity of the Gurensi people of Ghana. In contrast to ethnocentric representations of "subsistence" economies, I show that these economies are characterized by an ecologically balanced ratio of production to need. They are based on an understanding of

the environment as engaged in the activity of giving. Economic dispositions are predicated upon trust in nature's abundance, in contrast to the Western preoccupation with scarcity. In the place of a political economy of scarcity and control, we have socio-ecological infusions into economy: society eschews accumulation and ensures sustainability through redistribution and sharing of the surplus that the land itself bestows upon humans.

Zarathustra and the Gurensi earth priest together reveal how such relations of exchange are also *power* relations. For the Gurensi, this takes the form of a debt that humans have to pay to the earth, which is conceived as reciprocating ancestors. For Nietzsche the exchange of gifts is understood as more contentious and agonistic, rather than reciprocal. Whereas Zarathustra's self-mastery aims at re-crafting modern anthropocentric habits of perception in pursuit of new ecological identities and sensitivities, the earth priest helps us to see how such tactics of existence are already approximated by large groups of people. If it is Zarathustra's movements between solitude and sociality, between peaks and valleys, between going up and going under that enable him to shift perspectives between humans and nonhumans, it is the everyday strategies of coping of Northern Ghanaian communities that allow people to "re-enchant" human existence and harmonize it with the vicissitudes of a continuously changing environment. Whereas Zarathustra adopts perspectivism as active intersections between different processes, within an open universe that has not, ultimately, been predesigned for the human species, the earth priest tends toward an image of world that would head toward beneficent harmony if we would only lighten our ecological footprint. These two images of the world intersect and speak to one another, but they do not always mesh

together. In the contrast with the earth priest and his elders Nietzsche becomes scrubbed of some of the dominating and rank-ordering tendencies of his pro-mastery rhetoric. At the same time, Nietzsche's emphasis on agonism draws attention to the ever-present possibility of ancestral adversity in Gurensiland. It reveals that full harmonization between people and nature may not be ever possible. Where the earth priest sometimes sees ancestral punishment, Zarathustra sees an innocence of worldly becoming that "we" often interpret in ways that demand scapegoats to punish.

For both Zarathustra and the earth priest, however, to know the environment means to personify and acknowledge rather than to objectify it. Knowledge becomes less a set of specifications to "pass down" from generation to generation, and more a heightened perceptual sensitivity to the earth as an animate knowledge-holder and locus of intergenerational wisdom. Such understanding of knowledge troubles familiar philosophical demarcations between epistemology and ontology. It inheres in mutually transformative relationships of "we-ness" between people and the environment, rather than "otherness," which exacerbates differences and obscures togetherness. By ascribing a material aspect or existence to what are often understood as only "ideas" or "states of mind," perspectivism and animism rework received notions of what counts as environmentalism and environmental political theory.

In the pages to follow I blend ethnography and textual analysis to invite the rich chronicles of lived experience in Northern Ghana to converse with and transform the abstract categories of Euro-American political theory. This blend not only highlights how philosophy intersects with everyday life but also reveals ecological relations as profoundly communicative and dialogical. The relations between climate, land, plants,

animals, and cultural practices can be understood as themselves social. These relations entail inter-species communicative experiences and an ethics that eschews abstract philosophical frameworks. Instead, they negotiate the multidimensional and complex interdependencies between humans and a variety of nonhumans, including the demands by the land, trees, and animals for specific ethical relationships and responses from humans.

PERSPECTIVISM AND ANIMISM: WAYS OF LIVING WELL IN THE COMPANY OF OTHERS

Tindaana: If I die I will turn to a crocodile. So all of us here are crocodiles and therefore we taboo it... The python snake is our mother, and that is the ancestral god Awubugo the Tingana.

A: What happens if someone violates the rules?

T: When one disobeys the rules you will get boils all over your body and you will end up dying a very bad death.

A: Are there still a lot of crocodiles or pythons snakes around here?

T: They used to be there but because people try catching them, they move to far places in the bush where people cannot get them. Sometimes they come around but not many. If I die and turn to a python I will have to come around for my people to see me before I go far to the bush.

GURENSI TINDAANA, *In Discussion with Author*

...my *teaching* is in danger, weeds want to be wheat! My enemies have become powerful and have distorted the image of my teaching, so that those dearest to me must be ashamed of the gifts I gave them... With these words Zarathustra leaped to his feet, but not like a frightened person fighting for air, but instead more like a seer and a singer on whom the spirit has descended. In amazement his eagle and his snake looked at him, for like the dawn an impending happiness lay upon his face. What just happened to me, my animals? – said Zarathustra. Am I not transformed? Did bliss not come to me like a storm wind?

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

In contemporary ecological thought, conversing with crocodiles, pythons, and eagles is not an ordinary occurrence. Most environmentalists would have nothing to say to a snake.⁸ Calls to secure the survival of the planet have often been exposed, upon

closer inspection, to be calls for the preservation of an industrial way of life, reducing ecology to a set of managerial strategies aimed at resource efficiency and risk management.⁹ Likewise, many “deeper” approaches that aim to extend duties, rights, and obligations to nonhumans inadvertently reduce the environment either to raw material for conceptualization or to a passive context for human action. By portraying the environment and its processes as objects of technical management or ethical consideration, the agency and subjectivity to manage or assign value are always located in the human, while other forms of existence become, at best, passive recipients of ecological concern. Animals, plants, and the land have no reciprocal obligations towards humans. Some even act as if the earth would return to a set of organic harmonies if the human imprint were lightened, rather than oscillating between periods of stability and rapid phase transitions.

Both Zarathustra and the Gurensi *tindaana* substitute for such human-nonhuman disparities an ecological understanding that proceeds from the mutuality and sociability of people and the environment. Pythons and the savanna are human in the same way that dead ancestors are the living environment. People and environment are experienced as part of each other, and as reciprocally enmeshed in a web of active, sometimes whimsical, agencies that they are obliged to interpret and negotiate together. Humans do not work *on* or *against* the environment, but *with* it in continuous, albeit not always harmonious, intercourse.¹⁰ In such conversations, both Zarathustra and the *tindaana* acknowledge nonhuman beings as kin, adversaries, or allies who hold distinct points of view, worthy of respect and consideration. There is marked human-nonhuman exchange

and communication, in which animals, plants, and the land nourish and nurture humans in return for respect and proper conduct.¹¹

I seek to explore Gurensi animism and Nietzschean perspectivism as two related forms of *experiential* environmentalism, in which humans receive ethical and practical cues from a lively communicating environment. Such environmentalism treats ecological threats as a set of lived risks shared by a community of beings rather than as planetary abstractions. Climate change, deforestation, disease, and species loss become perceived not merely as ecological degradation, but as ethical hazards and as the erosion of specific relationships, for people have imperiled the ethico-spiritual protection and respect afforded by a reciprocating and nurturing environment. A rupture in the body of nature implies a breakdown of ethical order. The sickness of an individual is symptomatic of the sickness of the world around him; human fertility is bound to the regenerative capacities of the earth.

Environmentalism can be also understood here as a set of ethico-political strategies to intensify human perception of the interconnectedness of living and non-living beings. It becomes a means of receiving messages from the environment. For the Gurensi, this awareness of living within ecologies of beings—the communion of experience that lies at the heart of animist sociality—is generated through direct perceptual involvement in conjoint action and cohabitation of the same locality.¹² For Nietzsche's Zarathustra, it requires the discipline of cultivation, of forging a sensibility capable of closer discernment of the presence of multiple degrees of agency distributed along a continuum of humans and nonhumans that approximates an animist federation of beings. When a society lives in a close intercourse with nature, regulating its existence on

the basis of observable processes of transition—rain and drought, life and death, the setting and rising of the sun, planting and harvest—the “good life” is that which supports the flourishing of diverse forms of existence, and not only humans. Such an ethic of the “good life” anchors Nietzsche’s philosophical ideas in the diversity of African lived experiences in a scaled-up, globalizing world. This is a largely pragmatic and down-to-earth ethic, restricted to particular contexts of relational activity, such as the encounters between snakes and humans. It draws attention not only to Zarathustra as a profoundly ecological thinker but also to the wealth of existing other-than-modern ways of being human that resonate with his teachings.

Animism has enjoyed a contemporary revival within the social sciences under an umbrella of academic approaches that have come to be known as “new animisms.” New animisms eschew previous scholarly attempts to identify animism as either a metaphoric projection of human society onto nature, as in the sociological tradition of Emile Durkheim, or as a manifestation of “primitive” man’s inability to distinguish dreams from reality, as in the anthropological tradition of Edward Tylor. Thinkers such as Philippe Descola, Nurit Bird-David, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Tim Ingold, Graham Harvey, and Laura Rival have reexamined animism by denying the primacy of Western metaphysics over indigenous understandings. Instead, they attempt to privilege indigenous “relational ontologies” and what the animists themselves say about spirits, souls, and animals.¹³ Harvey, for instance, describes animism as practices of living well in the company of other persons, “not all of whom are human but all of whom are worthy of respect.”¹⁴

In this section, I build on such understandings of animism as a set of alternative existential orientations and dispositions.¹⁵ Both animism and perspectivism are more than systems of “beliefs” that some humans embrace in order to act *upon* the environment; they are also immanent to the very activity of forming relationships with other shapes, forces, and beings. Both Zarathustra and the Gurensi earth priest relate to the environment not as inanimate “nature” but as worlds gathered within a web of personalized relationships. These relationships are built and maintained through conversation, quarrel, exchange, and a continuous process of investing and dis-investing with gifts that carry new perspectives and identities. Let’s start with Nietzsche’s perspectivism first.

Nietzsche and Viveiros de Castro: Exchanging Perspectives

For Nietzsche, the entire world, and not only humans, is engaged in interpretation:

Physicists believe in a “true world” in their own fashion, a firm systematization of atoms in necessary motion, the same for all beings...But they are in error. The atom they posit is inferred according to the logic of perspectivism of consciousness and is therefore a subjective fiction. This world picture that they sketch differs in no essential way from the subjective world picture: it is only construed with more extended senses [with microscopes, etc.] but with *our* senses nonetheless—And in any case they left something out of the constellation without knowing it: precisely this necessary perspectivism by virtue of which every center of force—and not only man—construes all the rest of the world from its own viewpoint, i.e., measures, feels, forms, according to its own force- They forgot to include this perspective-setting force in “true being”—in school language: the subject.¹⁶

Perspectivism involves an intensified sensitivity to specificity. It is bound to our sensory participation in a world composed of multiple forces with differential degrees of experience; these forces interpret the environment upon which they act. Perspectivism is inherently ecological: it requires us to experience ourselves as one mode of interpretation

among others interacting to foment a world that exceeds all.¹⁷ Humans are not the pinnacle of existence, but rather an outgrowth of the creative flux of organic life: “The world seen, felt, interpreted as thus and thus so that organic life may preserve itself in this perspective of interpretation. Man is not only a single individual but one particular line of the total living organic world. That *he* endures proves that a species of interpretation (even though accretions are still being added) has also endured.”¹⁸ Man is one vector through which life proliferates itself.

In Nietzsche’s lexicon, life is “not the adaptation of inner circumstances to outer ones, but will to power, which, working from within, incorporates and subdues more and more of that which is ‘outside.’”¹⁹ Or, rather, life is “a multiplicity of forces, connected by a common mode of nutrition.”²⁰ To say that life is Will to Power is not to assert a theme of human domination over other humans and mastery over nature. It is to advance a conception of life as affirmation and upsurge. This does not mean that all life aims to assimilate the other, that it struggles to appropriate the non-self in Hegelian fashion. Interpretation always takes place within a field of forces exercised against other forces. The will is the differential aspect of force that affirms itself not in self-identity but in difference: “there must be present something that wants to grow and interprets the value of whatever else wants to grow.”²¹ Life cannot be conceived in and for itself, but only in contention with other lives and powers. It is not an inner principle of unity emerging from a transcendental ego, but instead a force that marks a difference within a field of forces: “it is affected by the forces of that field, and it exists due to them as much as due to itself. Its sensitivity yields its activity, its power, and its Will to Power makes it sensitive.”²² It

is this pathos of distance—the feeling of connection and distinction—that is the fundamental affect of power.²³

If power is always will to more power and growth, then each mode of interpretation exists not in self-identical being but rather in the transformation and discharge of force (i.e. in the surpassing of itself in dynamic engagements with other forces, some of which are in affinity with it and others in opposition). Thus Nietzsche's perspectivism extends the inter-human subjectivity through which we engage the rest of the world: different modes of subjectivity extend from natural and cosmic processes to humanity. Subjectivity is not only ineliminable to a certain degree but also finds differential degrees of expression in nonhuman processes and forces that are entangled with cultural and social forces. The limits of subjectivity can be stretched through technological devices and aesthetic experiences that sensitize us to different modes of interpretation in the universe.

Nietzsche's point of view here is bound to evoke what Viveiros de Castro has also called "perspectivism," the term he uses in his description of the relational ontologies of Amerindian societies. According to Viveiros de Castro, many indigenous people of the Americas "world" in the following way:

One of the implications of the Amerindian animic-perspectival ontology is, indeed, that there are no autonomous, natural facts, for what we see as "nature" is seen by other species as "culture," i.e., as institutional facts—what we see as blood, a natural substance, is seen by jaguars as manioc beer, an artefact; our mud is the hammock of the tapirs and so on... We have here a case of cultural universalism, which has as its counterpart what could be called natural relativism. It is this inversion of our pairing of nature to the universal and culture to the particular that I have labelled "perspectivism"... For Amerindians, lions, or rather jaguars, not only can talk, but we are perfectly able to understand what they say—they "speak of" exactly the same things as we do—although what they mean (what they are "talking about") is another matter...(Multi)cultural relativism supposes a diversity of subjective and partial representations, each striving to

grasp an external and unified nature, which remains perfectly indifferent to those representations. Amerindian thought proposes the opposite: a representational or phenomenological unity which is purely pronominal or deictic, indifferently applied to a radically objective diversity. One single “culture,” multiple “natures”—one epistemology, multiple ontologies. Perspectivism implies multinaturalism, for a perspective is not a representation²⁴

In Amerindian perspectivism, individuated beings and forces—animals, spirits, the dead, plants, and objects—apprehend reality from distinct points of view. It is not because these beings and forces are endowed with humanity that they are subjects: to the contrary, it is the point of view that creates a subject rather than an object.²⁵ A “point of view” entails an inside from which an outside can appear, and it is in the carving out of this inward space or interiority that a “subject” is born. As such, perspectivism cannot be understood as a multiplicity of representations of the same world. What varies is the world construed.

Nietzsche’s pan-perspectivism has significant resonances with that of Viveiros de Castro. Both agree that no single perspective can exhaust the abundance of reality: “There are many kinds of eyes. Even the sphinx has eyes—and consequently there are many kinds of ‘truths,’ and consequently there is no truth.”²⁶ Once human beings or jaguars are situated within a larger web of socio-ecological processes, the perspective of each is revealed to be finite and tangled with other perspectives. By affirming nature as intersecting cultures, both Nietzsche and Viveiros de Castro advance ontological pluralism. To the extent to which a perspective refers to a specific way of organizing reality according to the needs and will of a particular form of life, existence reveals itself according to a plurality of viewpoints.

However, only Nietzsche’s perspectivism effectively troubles the metaphysical presumption that *human* subjectivity dominates the totality of existence. For Nietzsche,

perspectivism does not mean that appearances are profiles of an essential cultural variant like Viveiros de Castro's "soul." Viveiros de Castro writes that "animals have a human, sociocultural inner aspect that is 'disguised' by an ostensibly bestial bodily form."²⁷ In contrast, Nietzsche retorts that there is no essence—soul, spirit, or innate intentionality identical to human consciousness—to be sought behind the differentiation of appearances. If interpreting is understood as the upsurge of life and perspectives as powers that generate other perspectives by continual differentiation, then it follows that there are no pre-given persons, selves, egos, subjects, or facts. There are only interpretations and interpretations of interpretations:

The "subject" is not something given, it is something added and invented and projected behind what there is.- Finally, is it necessary to posit an interpreter behind the interpretation? Even this is invention, hypothesis. In so far as the word "knowledge" has any meaning, the world is knowable; but it is *interpretable* otherwise, it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings.- "Perspectivism." It is our needs that interpret the world; our drives and their For and Against.²⁸

Once we see that drives are not innate forces but culturally imbued searching processes below consciousness, it becomes clear that all existence is essentially "interpretation," the expression of a fundamental ontological dispersion and differentiation. Interpretation is not a mental process added to life processes or an exercise of a sovereign mind transmitted onto passive matter. It is a life force that is always plural and relational; it is always exercised on another will. To exist is to interpret: the subject becomes as she interprets.²⁹ Interpretation involves a positive struggle with others to annex reality by extending the mastery of one form of life over the antecedent forces against which it struggles: "whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it; all events in the organic world are a subduing, a

becoming master, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous ‘meaning’ and ‘purpose’ are necessarily obscured or even obliterated.”³⁰ And yet, out of these clashes, new unions sometimes emerge.

Interpretation thus proceeds not by some sovereign operation carried out by a subject, but by the ruse and dissimulation that govern life.³¹ The meanings and purposes that interpretation places on appearances are manifestations of the Will to Power that orders them in relation to one another. To interpret the meaning of a particular being is to determine the quality of the forces which command it or with which this being is in contention with. The ego or the subject—as a factor of unity—is a product of such contention, not its origin. Each appearance is itself generative, proliferating new appearances, divergent from itself. Existence, as a plurality of intersecting perspectives, is not predicated on an original unity or identity. Difference is primary, while identity, whether “natural” or “cultural,” is something *become*.³²

At first glance, Viveiros de Castro concurs with Nietzsche that perspectivism does not involve a world peopled by a multiplicity of predefined subjects: “the point of view creates the subject; whatever is activated or ‘agented’ by the point of view will be a subject.”³³ Like Nietzsche, he seems to suggest that there are no pre-existing persons or selves. There are only perspectives and exchanges of perspectives: “there is no dialectics of ‘self’ and ‘other’ intended, for there is no synthesis and co-production, but rather alternation and disjunction, that is, exchange (of perspectives).”³⁴ Wherever there is a point of view, there is a subject. Subjecthood is understood as the capacity to occupy a point of view: “The object must either be ‘expanded’ to a full-fledged subject—a spirit;

an animal in its human, reflexive form—or else understood as related to a subject.”³⁵ The Amerindian model presupposes that the other of the subject is another subject, not an object, and that an object can be approached as “an incompletely interpreted subject.”³⁶ However, this multiplicity of perspectives revolves around humanity as the universal model of subjecthood. Whether human or animal, whatever possesses a human soul is a subject, and whatever has a soul is capable of having a point of view.³⁷ What we have is a reversal—and not a refusal—of the Western logic of metaphysical unities and binaries. Animals can be humans because they are regarded as persons with a soul and granted capacities identical to those of humans. The position of the human subject is generalized to the entire web of life while its materiality is relativized so that each subject can perceive the world from her own position. Nature is not opposed to culture but instead becomes an extension of culture in a cosmos organized according to the order of human subjectivity.³⁸

This is a proposition that Nietzsche would resist. The human self or the subject as metaphysical unity, says Nietzsche, is a fiction: “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything.”³⁹ What there *is* is the body as a multiplicity of interacting, purposive forces; a chaos amidst which arises a commanding force that comes to impose a perspective (“I say to you: one must still have chaos in oneself in order to give birth to a dancing star. I say to you: you still have chaos in you”).⁴⁰ The body, as an organization of competing or coexisting drives/wills, interprets itself as a unity each time one will or another attains temporary dominion. All life interprets and orders whatever it encounters into different sets of relations according to its own needs. The organism itself is a product of these

multiple wills interpreting and organizing one another. Each mode of interpretation can be seen as a function of the particular order of searching drives and relations of which a body is composed. By defining being as chaos, Nietzsche liberates nature from the hegemony of human subjectivity that characterizes Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism. "Nature" is culturized at the same time as "culture" is naturalized.

On the other hand, Nietzsche and Viveiros de Castro share a number of affinities across their differences. Both concur that perspectives are located in the body. According to Nietzsche, "every specific body strives to become master over all space and to extend its force (–its will to power:)...it continually encounters similar efforts on the part of other bodies and ends by coming to an arrangement (a "union") with those of them that are sufficiently related to it: thus they then conspire together for power. And the process goes on."⁴¹ Here Nietzsche moves closer to the Spinozist model of conative bodies according to which bodies strive to enhance their power by composing alliances with other bodies. The power of each body to affect other bodies involves a corresponding capacity to be affected. What this tendency of bodies to increase their power in or as heterogeneous "unions" suggests is that perspectival agency becomes distributed across a heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized in a human body or in a collective produced only by human efforts.⁴² The earth and all existence—human as well as plant, animal, and mineral—are understood as interdependent material processes and dynamic constellations of Will to Power.

For Viveiros de Castro, in turn, "bodies are the way in which alterity is apprehended as such...if 'culture' is a reflexive perspective of the subject, objectified through the concept of soul, it can be said that 'nature' is the viewpoint which the subject

takes of other body-affects; if culture is the subject's nature, then nature is the form of the other as body, that is, as the object for a subject."⁴³ The body is understood *as a bundle of affects and capacities* or ways of being that constitute an interpretive habitus. It becomes essential what the body eats, how it grows and moves, how it communicates, how it inhabits, whether it is gregarious like the Gurensi earth priest or solitary like Thoreau. The body differentiates.⁴⁴ Interpreting is a question of percepts, not concepts.

Thus Nietzschean and Amerindian perspectivism agree that it is bodies that interpret and determine what is interpreted. Interpretations can be described as actions, or more accurately, as interactions and exchanges between bodies that have their own wills and drive-trajectories. Exchanging perspectives involves a degree of mutuality of embodiment and relatedness. The world cannot be transformed through a change of mental orientations or by alternative social constructions alone. Transformation always entails altered body conditions. Perspectives are at once bodily conditions and socio-cultural orientations.⁴⁵ Rather than being self-referential unique "contexts" for human action, viewpoints refer to the shared potential to coexist with a multiplicity of nonhuman bodies.

This is not to suggest that the same kind of body/soul (or percept/concept) dualism characterizes both forms of perspectivism. Viveiros de Castro mobilizes such dualist frames in order to show that the relations between nature and society are themselves social. Nietzsche, on the other hand, refers to such categories only in order to foreground them as an anthropocentric metaphysics that his perspectivism rejects. In Nietzsche, perspectivism is often synonymous with interpretation, imparting a recognition of bodies as essentially hermeneutical. *Physis*, the incessant unfolding of ever

new and divergent interpretations is also continual *logos* and assembling of bodies that interpret.⁴⁶ To say that perspectives are interpretations is to rule out the mechanical reproduction of any one perspective in favor of a world swarming with periodic creativity and novelty.

African Animism and the Continuous Re-Enchantment of the World

Like Nietzsche's perspectivism, African animism troubles the boundaries and binaries—body/soul, nature/culture, and human/nonhuman—that permeate anthropocentric thinking. Animals, plants, and ordinary objects are endowed with capacities that Euro-American rationality identifies exclusively with humans. According to Harry Garuba, the most important characteristic of animist thought—in contrast to the major monotheistic religions and Western philosophical traditions—is its almost total refusal to allow for “unlocalized, unembodied, and unphysicalized” gods and spirits:

Animism is often simply seen as belief in objects such as stones or trees or rivers for the simple reason that animist gods and spirits are *located* and *embodied* in objects: the objects are the physical and material manifestations of the gods and spirits. Instead of erecting graven images to symbolize the spiritual being, animist thought spiritualizes the object world, thereby giving the spirit a local habitation...nature and its objects are endowed with a spiritual life both simultaneous and coterminous with their natural properties. The objects thus acquire a social and spiritual meaning within the culture far in excess of their natural properties and their use value. Rivers, for example, not only become natural sources of water but are prized for various other reasons...the social and cultural meanings that become attached to the objects often break off from the purely religious and acquire an existence of their own as part of the general process of signification in society.⁴⁷

Amidst the grassy and seasonally changing landscape of the Northern Ghanaian savanna, for example, certain baobab trees, groves, streams, rocky ranges, and other natural bodies are identified as the dwellings of the earth Gods (*tingana*) of the Gurensi people. A

tingane usually marks the location of settlement of the first ancestor—the pioneer settler and key ancestor of a village—or a powerful place identified by a soothsayer. The areas identified by the “original” settlers as places of sacrifice to the earth gods become abodes for the spirits of the whole community (*tinkugere*). Unlike the gods of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, the earth gods are both physicalized in nature and historicized in society. Their close ties to specific clan and family genealogies make it impossible for them to escape history.

In addition to bearing an irreducible sociality and historicity, African animism actively resists “the goal of Weberian rationalization and secularization” by continually spiritualizing the object world, thereby anticipating some recent Western images of pan-psychism.⁴⁸ The discourses and practices usually associated with modernity and a rationalization of nature lead instead to a *continual re-enchantment* rather than a disenchantment of the world. We will see that animism’s encounters with Western modernity are governed by logic of *inclusion* rather than exclusion: its assimilative reach elides binaries and contradictions in our usual sense of these words. Upon arrival in Accra, Toyotas are “baptized” and “tropicalized,” and then receive the blessings of the Ga priest or the elders’ prayers. In the Upper East of Ghana, Western medicine, clinical expertise, and blood transfusions are hailed by the spirits as welcome complements to the chief of medicine’s diagnostic portfolio. Climate change has become increasingly harmonized with *tindaanas*’ strategies to expound and address famine and disasters at the same time that chiefs integrate modernization and development into their “traditional” roles and duties.

That this predilection to continual re-enchantment is not simply a matter of religiosity has been underscored by the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, who describes animist thought as “an attitude of philosophical accommodation” that emerges out of the code on which many African worldviews are based:

an attitude of philosophical accommodation is constantly demonstrated in the attributes accorded most African deities, attributes which deny the existence of impurities or “foreign” matter, in the god’s digestive system. Experiences which, until the event, lie outside the tribe’s cognition are absorbed through the god’s agency, are converted into yet another piece of social armoury in its struggle for existence, and enter into the lore of the tribe. This principle creates for society a non-doctrinaire mould of constant awareness, one which stays outside the monopolistic orbit of the priesthood, outside any claims to gnostic secrets by special cults. Interpretation, as it does universally, rests mostly in the hands of such intermediaries, but rarely with the dogmatic finality of Christianity and Islam.⁴⁹

Soyinka observes that European scholars frequently miss the “the continuing evolution of tribal wisdom through an acceptance of the elastic nature of knowledge.” He highlights the key role of priests and elders in reinforcing—through observances, rituals, and sacrifices—the existing awareness of ecological and cosmic entanglement in African communities.⁵⁰ The assimilative wisdom of African animism recognizes the conjunction of the worlds of various beings, where the mystical and the nonliving are concomitant areas of reality like any others. Animism affirms a constantly revolving and iterative relationship between humans, natural phenomena, and chthonic presences, a process that it depicts as self-regulating.⁵¹

To put African animism into the context of Nietzsche’s perspectivism, we may say that it endows non-humans with species- and “thing”-specific perspectives on a multi-faceted reality. Animism is not a narcissistic projection of humanity onto nature but rather a buoyant multiplicity of coexisting “interpretations.” Human-nonhuman relations

are refigured as *socio-ecological* relations: the earth may be regarded by a Gurensi community as life-generating ancestors (*yaabas*); baobab trees and crocodiles may approach and, in turn, may be approached by clan members as kin and blood relatives; plants, air and, water may act as the chief of medicine's (*bagenabasɔ*) key associates and vultures as his guardians.

In the “perspective-setting” jargon of Nietzsche's physicist, these relations approximate subject-subject relations. They reveal each interpretation as the mutual animation and meeting of the sometimes reciprocal and sometimes confrontational perspectives of other beings and forces. We will see in the next section that gift exchange can be also understood as an exchange of perspectives. Interpretations always encounter counter-interpretations: to see the ancestral potency of the land as being revealed in an abundant harvest becomes simultaneously an interpretation of the concatenation of certain events and evidence that one is also the recipient of ancestral attention.⁵² What to living humans is blood is food to the earth gods; what to the living is a grave for the dead or a fertile womb of a woman becomes an ancestral residence.

The differences between viewpoints are a function of the specificity of bodies. When humans lose their bodies, as in death, they cease to appear as human beings to others.⁵³ Instead, they may return to live with their kin as baobab trees, pythons, or crocodiles. Although animals, trees, and spirits interpret just as living people do, without the same type of body they perceive differently. As a deceased elder, the ancestral baobab tree must be approached appropriately. The tree receives the blood and feathers of a sacrificed animal rather than its meat. It is draped in a strip of cloth rather than in a full-size smock. In both cases, his arboreal body would not allow the *yaaba* to eat the meat or

wear the smock as the living would do. Although a son's relationship with a deceased father or grandfather continues, the method of interaction becomes different when the latter is dead.⁵⁴ When the *tindaana* performs a sacrifice, it is not merely a matter of knowledge or of shifting perspectives in the sense of mentally putting oneself in another's shoes. In order to straddle coexisting worlds, the *tindaana* (earth priest) has to don animal skins (*tankoloco*), a calabash cap (*bagere wula*), a goatskin handbag (*talana*), a black triangular loin-cloth (*lebere*), a knife (*sua*), and a walking stick (*tindaan-doore*) cut from the stock of a guinea-corn plant or okro plant. He has to activate the powers of a different body.⁵⁵ The skins are a borrowed body endowed with the affects and capacities to transform the identity of those who wear them.⁵⁶



Gurensi Tindaana

Just like the earth priest who enlists the assistance of animal and plant bodies other than his own, Zarathustra has to reach beyond his body in order to shift perspectives

between humans and nonhumans. Such exchangeability of perspectives and body metamorphoses enable Zarathustra to pursue an ethic of living that remains true to “the meaning of the earth.”⁵⁷ Zarathustra shows that to think ecologically means not only to think about nature in a certain way but also to allow thinking to unfold and play itself out in the materiality of the earth. The earth is the body and the milieu in which the animal “human being” transforms corporally and learns how to experience herself as being terrestrial: “It is time that mankind set themselves a goal. It is time that mankind plant the seed of their highest hope. Their soil is still rich enough for this. But one day this soil will be poor and tame, and no tall tree will be able to grow from it anymore.”⁵⁸ Zarathustra’s self-overcoming is defined in terms of natural forces, bodies, and changes: soil preparation and seed sowing; transplanting of trees, tending of gardens, and crop harvesting; breeding and herding of animals; rolling thunderstorms and ripening fruit.⁵⁹ The role of the earth in his cultivation as an ethical subject is pervasive.

The success of Zarathustra’s self-overcoming is linked to proper relationships and interactions with other beings and forces. If what defines and sustains the human species are habitual interpretations and bodily dispositions, the task of Zarathustra’s self-overcoming involves overcoming both the human habitus and habituation itself. Human are means, not ends: “What is great about human beings is that they are a bridge and not a purpose: what is lovable about human beings is that they are a *crossing over* and a *going under*. I love those who do not know how to live unless by going under, for they are the ones who cross over.”⁶⁰ Like the web of cosmic entanglements of African animism, human life cannot be conceived as an isolated and self-sufficient form of existence, but rather stands in continuity and conflict with natural forces and other forms

of life. In *Zarathustra*'s Prologue the future of humanity depends on affirming the "bridge" that connects human, animal, and overman. In contrast to Western traditions of humanism and Enlightenment, which identify the "good life" with emancipation of the human from the animal, Nietzsche highlights the key role played both by human animality and by other animals in the formation of ethical life. The "good life" arises from friendship and companionship with animals and various natural forces, and from an attitude of presumptive openness to nonhuman perspectives, rather than from the exercise of mastery over them.⁶¹ It requires Zarathustra's cultivation of gift-giving virtue by assuming the perspective of the sun, which is turned outwards and reaches out to the other.

THE GIVING ENVIRONMENT: ON BESTOWING VIRTUE AND RAIN

This section puts pan-perspectivism and animism into conversation in order to explore the practice of gift giving as an exchange of perspectives between people and the environment. I show how both Zarathustra and the Gurensi draw upon the interdependencies between people and a giving environment to "model" their own economies and modalities of exchange. Such economic models of abundance not only provide ecological alternatives to market exchange but also reveal human-nonhuman interdependencies as *power* relations. Whereas unprecedented events such as climate change become harmonized with the Gurensi model of nature as reciprocating ancestors, for Zarathustra, gift giving is a way to acknowledge the inevitability of power

differentials and the absence of a natural tendency toward equilibrium or self-harmonization.

Questions of gift giving, exchange, and reciprocity are central to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. If we read the title of the book carefully, we find a few prompts. Conventionally, a gift is understood to be something that we do not obtain by our own efforts. It cannot be bought or acquired through an act of coercion or will: it is something bestowed upon us. A gift that cannot be given is no longer a gift.⁶² With *Zarathustra*, explains Nietzsche in the preface of *Ecce Homo*, “I have given mankind the greatest present that has ever been made to it so far.”⁶³ The book is a gift “for all and none.” Nietzsche’s gift is put into circulation and is meant to keep circulating without becoming anyone’s permanent possession. The gift must keep moving: it must be given forward rather than spent on oneself or converted into another’s capital.⁶⁴

The same logic of continuous circulation governs Zarathustra’s gifts. Zarathustra is a speaker, and what he bestows upon others—humans as well as nonhumans—are his speeches, his teachings.⁶⁵ According to Heidegger, Zarathustra is an advocate, a *Fürsprecher* (where *für* means „for the benefit of, or in behalf, of“). The *Fürsprecher* advocates and serves as a “mouthpiece.” He interprets. He explains that for which he speaks: “I, Zarathustra, the advocate of life, the advocate of suffering, the advocate of the circle.”⁶⁶ Zarathustra advocates on behalf of life, suffering, and the circle. This triplet—“life, suffering, circle”—belongs together: “all Being is Will to Power, which suffers as creative, colliding will and thus wills itself in the eternal recurrence of the same.”⁶⁷ Zarathustra interprets in a field of forces by suffering to maintain a line of difference in that field. His advocacy is propelled by the sensitivity of life to life external to it, life that

is different from it. It is through the back-and-forth exchange of gifts between Zarathustra and his followers that the teacher seeks to teach his students how to cultivate such sensitivities.

In “On Free Death” Zarathustra initiates one such exchange. On his way to meet his “free” death, undertaken as a gift to the living, Zarathustra passes a golden ball to his disciples: “Zarathustra had a goal, he threw his ball. Now you my friends are the heirs of my goal, to you I throw the golden ball. More than anything I like to see you, my friends, throwing the golden ball!”⁶⁸ Yet, before he can die, leaving his disciples indebted to the continual circulation of his gift, they return the golden ball, drawing their teacher into a series of exchanges that postpone his death:

In parting, however, his disciples presented him with a staff upon whose golden knob a snake encircled the sun. Zarathustra was delighted with the staff and leaned on it; then he spoke thus to his disciples. “Tell me now: how did gold come to have the highest value? Because it is uncommon and useless and gleaming and mild in its luster; it bestows itself always... This is your thirst: to become sacrifices and gifts yourselves, and therefore you thirst to amass all riches in your soul. Insatiably your soul strives for treasures and gems, because your virtue is insatiable in wanting to bestow. You compel all things to and into yourselves, so that they may gush back from your well as the gifts of your love. Indeed, such a bestowing love must become a robber of all values.”⁶⁹

The staff is a suitable gift for Zarathustra, the wanderer and the advocate of the circle as spiral. Its design may be a reference to the sun god Mithra.⁷⁰ As the god of contract and mutual obligation, Mithra appears both as a “friend” and as “contract.”⁷¹ Contracts and covenants make friends in the same way in which Zarathustra’s gifts create bonds and relationships of reciprocal obligations with his disciples. Mithra is commonly represented as encircled by a serpent, a personification of the earth, the cyclicity of time, and the continual renewal of life. As a farewell gift, the staff also stands for the powers of being able to negotiate the interdependencies between life and death, between earth and sky.

The disciples interpret Zarathustra's gift as advocacy of a simple model of reciprocity, through which a series of mutually binding obligations and exchanges are produced and maintained.

Bestowing virtue differs from the disciples' theory of reciprocal giving in several ways, according to Zarathustra's counter-interpretation. In reciprocal giving the gift goes back and forth between givers and receivers. In bestowing virtue, on the other hand, the gift moves in a non-linear way—in a spiral—to ensure that no one ever receives it from the same person that he gives it to. The smaller the circle is, the more closely its movement can be monitored and the more likely it is that one will start thinking as a salesman.⁷² Gold came to have the highest value, explains Zarathustra, because it is “uncommon and useless and gleaming and mild in its luster.” In other words, gift giving cannot be understood either from the perspective of the price calculus of market exchange or from the viewpoint of utilitarian and contractual obligations. Gold, like the sun, is a radiant body that “bestows itself always.” The sun is taken as a model of an economy of immense expenditure and excess: “I learned this from the sun when it goes down, the super-rich one: it pours gold into the sea from its inexhaustible wealth – such that even the poorest fisherman rows with *golden* oars!”⁷³ Like the sun, Zarathustra's body is open outward, bestowing his outflows evenly without ranking people, animals, and places. This is a model of giving as squandering that provokes responses from the earth in the form of growth, flowering, and energy.

Unlike market exchange, gift giving is not an exchange of objects or possessions. To give, for Zarathustra, means to give who one is and the stability of entrenched identities rather than what one possesses.⁷⁴ Accumulation of wealth is understood,

correspondingly, as a growth of spiritual dispositions, and not merely a distribution of material goods: “Insatiably your soul strives for treasures and gems, because your virtue is insatiable in wanting to bestow.” Rather than being a form of unrestricted and disinterested giving without any return, squandering entails its own inflows of renewed sensibility: “You compel all things to and into yourselves, so that they may gush back from your well as the gifts of your love.” One has to allow the influx of experience to become organized unconsciously in the human sensorium until a new sensitivity emerges and a reserve of energy can be drawn upon to bestow gifts of generosity and gratitude upon the earth and other humans. When the gift is used, it is not used up: as long as it is passed along it remains abundant.⁷⁵ This is an excess of energy that takes the form of an invitation to engage in the spiritualization of enmity. When Zarathustra bids his disciples to “lose me and find yourselves; and only when you have all denied me will I return to you,” he advocates a squandering and dispersal of disciples. Gift giving entails a pathos of distance between teacher and disciples, which rules out the latter’s self-identification as Zarathustra’s intellectual progeny. Only when the gift moves out of sight can its circulation remain beyond the control of an individual giver or a pair of gift partners. Squandering is compared to the force of an overflowing river—“a blessing and a danger to adjacent dwellers”—that cannot be traced back to an intentional subject or single origin.⁷⁶

The connections or “contracts” established by such circulation differ from the ties that bind groups organized through centralized power and top-down authority.⁷⁷ It is not when a part of oneself is transferred to another, but when it is expended through another that a new form of sociality appears. This new sociality puts Nietzsche’s apparent pro-

mastery rhetoric in a new light: gifts are empowering only if they teach others how to empower themselves and practice active reciprocity. In his conversation with the saint, Zarathustra distinguishes bestowing virtue from giving alms: “I do not give alms. For that I am not poor enough.”⁷⁸ By giving alms one places the object of charity in a state of indebtedness that reinforces power asymmetries. Such asymmetries are themselves forms of poverty and privation.⁷⁹ The idea is not to become dependent upon those whose gifts you have received, but to tap into an affective economy of abundance as a resource for remaking one’s own virtue and livelihood: “Physician, help yourself: Let that be his best help, that he sees with his own eyes the one who heals himself.”⁸⁰ The receiver of the gift is well understood as a self-healing physician, identified with the transient experience of defeating illness, rather than with the stability of an enduring health state. The giver of the gift approaches the receiver at a distance, showing respect for the other’s distinctiveness and singularity. Such distance should remain sufficient to ensure that the giver sometimes remains unrecognized, and that gift exchange does not become formalized as such: “Gladly I bestow as friend to friends. But strangers and poor people may pluck the fruit from my tree themselves: that way there is less shame.”⁸¹ Shame sets a precondition for *ressentiment*.

Bestowing virtue is an expression of an ecological insight as much as of gift exchange: “Let your bestowing love and your knowledge serve the meaning of the earth!...Do not let it fly away from earthly things and beat against eternal walls with its wings! Like me, guide the virtue that has flown away back to the earth – yes, back to the body and life.”⁸² What does Zarathustra mean by insisting that bestowing virtue has to “serve the meaning of the earth”? One possible answer highlights the interdependencies

between human ethical conduct and larger processes of the sun's overflowing expenditure and the circulation of energy on earth. Zarathustra's view can be conceived as a biocentric outlook that recognizes the superiority of solar energy as inexhaustible and nonpolluting. Everything in the biosphere is already preadapted to solar energy by millions of years of evolutionary history.⁸³ If the social world is a complex system that has evolved with reference to solar flows, then political, economic, and ethical institutions must be attuned to the dynamic equilibrium of the physical throughput of matter-energy.⁸⁴

On the other hand, to remain faithful to the earth means to maintain an affirmative relationship to the physicality of one's body in a way that expresses the complexity of entanglements between bodies and forces. That we are all made of earth is a recurrent theme in Zarathustra's teachings, who is a vocal critic of the advocacy of extraterrestrial hopes. The latter let their virtue "fly away from earthly things and beat against eternal walls with its wings." Here Zarathustra concurs with thinkers such as Val Plumwood who perceive the ecological crisis as a crisis of culture. Dominant economic, political, scientific, and ethical forms of reason have misunderstood their own enabling conditions—the body, ecology, and nonhuman nature—"because they have written these down as inferior or constructed them as background in arriving at an illusory and hyperbolized sense of human autonomy."⁸⁵ What requires philosophical engagement in the context of anthropocentric culture is "self rather than other, the limits imposed by the human rather than the nature side of the ethical relationship, the ethical stance of closure rather than the ethical stance of openness."⁸⁶ Self-overcoming can be seen as the

cultivation of such a stance of openness: Zarathustra performs a gift-giving economy that draws on the earthly excess to flourish and produce creative spirals.

Such a disposition of openness requires not merely a reversal of the hierarchy of human-centered values but a profound transformation of what counts as valuative thinking. In Zarathustra's lecture, bestowing virtue is described as the "robber of all values." It is named "the unnameable."⁸⁷ Giving a name to something produces an abstraction; it removes it from the flux of lived experience. This is a process of converting nameless experiences into differentiated concepts. We strip a bit of the life-force of a thing and assume power over it by naming it. If we give it a certain name, we qualify it and put into a drawer, forcing it into a category that can be opposed to another category. Then we make a morality out of it and evaluate it as a merit. Hence, Zarathustra's admonition: don't name your virtue so that it will remain unutterable while leading you on the path toward the overman.⁸⁸ This is an alternative way of valuative thinking, free from the Western belief in the merit of binary values such as real/apparent, being/becoming, life/non-life, and nature/culture. There is only one quality that one can assign to such unnameable virtue. The gift-giving virtue, says Zarathustra, is an "earthly" virtue.⁸⁹ An ethic that remains "faithful to the earth" cannot simply be known; it must be lived. The earth cannot be merely conceptualized; its energies must become infused into being. For Zarathustra, relatedness with the earth, rather than abstract theoretical contemplation, becomes the crucial foundation upon which the "higher" activities of thinking are predicated. Thinking and acting are co-extensive. This is a relational view of agency: what matters is where one stands in oscillating webs of relations

The centrality of lived experience to Zarathustra's earth-based thinking highlights a series of resonances between his gift-giving economy and Gurensi economies of reciprocity. The latter also revolve around a web of lived relationships between people and a giving environment. They can be understood as prayer economies that interweave the living, the dead, and the earth into interpersonal transactions. The dead transact with the living as identified ancestors (*yaabeduma*), and not as an anonymous collectivity. The earth (*tiŋa*) participates, in turn, as personified and named localities or shrines (*tingane*), in which the ancestors come back to reside with the clan or the village. Three different types of earth shrines can bear the name *tingane*: *yaaba-tia* (ancestral trees); *tingane* proper; and *tinkugere* (land stones or land spirits). Whereas a *yaaba-tia* or a *tingane* can be identified with a specific family or a village section, the *tinkugere* usually serves the whole community.⁹⁰

The distinctions between various earth shrines remain fluid. Some elders describe a process of “promotion” of shrines that merges the lifecycles of humans and trees: “when the father dies, he later goes to the ancestor station and becomes an ancestor, *yaaba*, and from *yaaba* he may go to the bush...the whole clan refer to you as the *tingane*.”⁹¹ Over the course of several human generations, new trees may spring up around the *yaaba-tia*, transforming it from an ancestral tree into a sacred grove (*tingane*). The older one gets, the more numerous one's children and grandchildren, and the more prominent an elder becomes as a reference point for the common good and future generations, establishing social identity, authority and obligations.⁹² The return of the ancestors as the proliferating growth of nature binds the continuity of identity and authority to cycles of ecological renewal of *tiŋa*. It also troubles Western demarcations

between natural, cultural, and supernatural. According to our modern way of thinking, their living elders are honored or paid respect, while dead ones are worshipped, a distinction that the Gurensi do not need. Offering millet beer or a fowl to the *tingane* is no more “religious” than giving it to a living elder.⁹³

The typical practice of petitioning and sacrificing to earth shrines and the ancestors involves giving gifts, to plead with and persuade the *yaabas* and natural agencies to provide some desired outcome. Before and after each farming season the *tindaana* (earth priest) performs sacrifices to the *tingana*. These seasonal sacrifices are known respectively as *Naarega* and *Mdan Koya*. *Naarega* involves an offering of the first *pito*, a local brew from early millet set aside by elders during the previous harvest season. The brew is given to the ancestors to thank them for their generosity and to plead for another propitious harvest. Sacrifices are also performed to aid the living in addressing a crisis or the threat of crisis:

When you are sick and open your month and call his name, cry and say “ancestral gods heal me,” he will certainly heal you. When one is also in trouble like someone raise a knife after you to kill and you cry to the ancestral Awubugo that help me, he will indeed help you. Now, after helping or saving you, he can ask you to offer a sheep or goat to him as he specifies. If the *tingane* does not ask for any animal you yourself can also decide to offer any animal for saving him as thanksgiving. Also...if your wife does not give birth, you can go to the *tingane* and tell him to give you a child and he will. That is the power of the *tingane*⁹⁴

Other elders have compared the *tingane* to a welfare officer who looks after people’s well-being, warding off whatever disaster may be afflicting an individual, family or community:

If the *tindaana* is somebody who is also for the welfare of the people, we’ll consult him and he will say: “you bring this because there is a likelihood of a drought coming, there’s likelihood of strong winds coming, so you bring me this so I will be able to block those things from coming.” That’s the *tingane*’s role. An individual can also have problems—maybe they have sleepless nights, ill health

or whatnot—so the *tingane* will say: “you bring me this, I should be able to block the illness from entering your house.”⁹⁵

It is the *tindaana*’s responsibility to find out why drought, infertility, and illness have occurred and to perform “the necessary sacrifices.” Like Zarathustra, the *Fürsprecher*, the *tindaana* is the “mouthpiece” that communicates ancestors’ perspectives to the living. His duty is to consult the soothsayer and find out what the ancestors and the earth need. If the ancestors say they want a cow, it is the *tindaana* who addresses such needs and sacrifices the cow to the shrine.

There are well-defined customary proceedings for libations and offerings, which are couched in the bodily and spatial idiom of the mutually courteous, easy-to-understand everyday intercourse with elders. The ancestral beings and natural agencies to which these offerings are addressed are expected to attend a particular earth shrine or locality. Prayers and petitions are never directed towards an abstract heaven or the sky. In sacrificing to shrines, men squat, addressing the ancestors as if face-to-face on the same level. The tone of address differs from ordinary speech but is similar to that of a customary salutation to an elder or chief when making a request. Heads are bared, voices are quiet, eyes are lowered, and bodily posture is deferential. The petition is always a public and open utterance, launched as much at the company present as at the ancestral powers addressed.⁹⁶ Sometimes it includes a threat to withhold a promised or demanded offering if the desired outcome is not granted. For instance, a *tindaana* may sacrifice raw millet flour without water. The ancestors are denied water: “If you want water you bring rain.”⁹⁷ The public exposure of such agonistic relations can be understood as a way to coerce the ancestors into ethical responsibility to the living that equals the accountability of the latter to the former. According to Meyer Fortes, this strategy never works: “In the

long run, death supervenes and this is interpreted as the victory of the ancestors or the Earth over the intractable living.”⁹⁸

Nonetheless, it is taken for granted that the ancestors and the earth will respond to petitions and sacrifices: “cry and say ‘ancestral gods heal me,’ he will *certainly* heal you.” The ancestors will become spiritually present, and even if it turns out that they have not granted one’s request, this would be for reasons that have remained unknown by the petitioner, and not because the ancestors are absent from the occasion.⁹⁹ In effect, when a disaster is interpreted as a punitive or corrective intervention, the ancestors are perceived to have acted rightfully, not arbitrarily. This is because people’s relationship with the earth as reciprocating ancestors is governed by a mutuality of reciprocal obligations. What holds for the ancestors holds reciprocally for their living descendants. A son is expected to pay respect to his parental forbears, to tend to their shrines by making offerings and pouring libations when these are commanded, regardless of the son’s sympathies or aversions, and irrespective of the deceased’s character or achievements. The ancestors behave in the same way, regardless of what their lifetime characters may have been: “The ancestor who was a devoted father and conscientious provider for his family in his lifetime is divined to be the source of illness, misfortune, and disturbance in his descendants’ lives in exactly the same way as is an ancestor who was a scoundrel and spendthrift.”¹⁰⁰ Like Zarathustra’s unnameable virtue, the economy of ever-present ancestral agencies involves a way of valuative thinking that is otherwise than the Western metaphysics of rank ordering and the merit of opposite values. Where the ancestors are nature, ethics can never take the form of an abstract set of moral imperatives. The good life can be only guaranteed by maintaining proper relations with the *yaabas*.¹⁰¹

This is consistent with *tindaanas*' and elders' repeated interpretations of climate change as ancestral retribution for the collective failures of the living to abide by this customary regime of mutuality of obligations. In our numerous conversations about the changing and unpredictable patterns of rainfall and local weather, *tindaanas*, chiefs, and elders all concurred that climate change is man-made, and not "natural":

With the course of religion, with the pretense of religion they will not forbid, so they start cutting these trees. In the end they wipe out the trees, the ancestors' trees. The gods are no more there so what is to prevent or bring down the rain? So they are saying that there is less feelings that the ancestors are staying there because "We are stronger than them"... That is man-made because God has given us these things—the trees, everything—and then there are those who felt they are no good and let's destroy them. That's the results we are now getting. If you adhere to the rules of the ancestors or the rules of God, we wouldn't be facing these problems. So it is not natural but it is man-made...others get firewood just to brew *pito*. So all these are causing hazards in the weather changes.¹⁰²

As people continue to "wipe out the trees," the ancestors' abodes are being steadily destroyed, reversing customary relations of power and authority. Deforestation forces the ancestors to leave home and to withdraw their protection for the living. Climate change is interpreted as the product of human failure to reciprocate and hold respectful custody of the gifts bestowed by a generous environment: "It is God that has made those things. Because all of us will look out for the rain. He is giving us the rain and they are not seeing it."¹⁰³ The adversity of the ancestors is directed towards harmonizing human-environment relations in accordance with the norms of reciprocal obligation that govern the intercourse between the living, the ancestors, and the earth. Like Zarathustra's gift-giving economy, the elders' dispositions are predicated upon trust in abundance, which contrasts with modern economies' fixation on a lust for more.¹⁰⁴ The environment contains enough for human well-being and sustenance, both Zarathustra and the *tindaana* agree, if social and ethical rules of modesty are followed. It is this attitude towards the

earth's abundance as a gift that itself generates wealth and increases resources: here economic activities start from a premise of a surplus in nature, situating human wants within the earth's available means.

This is not to say that abundance is unlimited. What the earth gives humans is affected by what humans give to the earth. A give-and-take relationship with the earth acknowledges human interdependence with natural processes. Such gift economies also have a built-in check on commodification: the incommensurability and non-substitutability of “goods,”—e.g. food, *pito*, blood, rainfall, and soothsaying (the Gurensi) and teachings, sensibilities (Zarathustra)—ensures that gifts cannot be easily converted into tradable commodities. Resources remain plentiful as long as humans participate in the seasonal cycles of gift giving. They appear scarce when gifts stop circulating and humans begin to convert ancestral trees into firewood and farmland: “In those days who dared to cut the forest without permission? They cut lots of the *tingana* and then you are supposed to leave a certain area within the *tingane*—you don't farm there. People farm the whole area. It's all annoying to the *tingane*.”¹⁰⁵ Another cause of climate change is attributed to a parallel disregard for the taboo on making noise from August to October, the time when the guinea corn pollination takes place. The ancestors associated excessive noise during harvest time with heavy winds, and more trees with more rain. They knew little about Western science but understood the importance of not driving away pollinators. Today the noise of “ghetto blasters” scares the insects away. Where the abundance of nature continues to reflect the moods and ecological intuitions of the ancestors, ample rain and pollinators testify to the mastery of the social adjustment to the rhythms of the natural world.¹⁰⁶

The punitive and erratic behavior of nature portends the sickness and maladaptation of a transforming social world, in which the advance of Christianity, modernization, and Western education collide with existing forms of authority and belonging:

There are changes now...Usually, they roam in the night—the ancestors or the ancestors' place. And then the *tingana*—they also roam in the night just to survey the area and to drive away evil. Now this time people pray throughout the night so they are unable to come out to also look and find out what may be befalling the community. So many churches come into the community—it drives away the *tingane* from roaming in the night. For that matter they also become annoyed and they can cause evil to befall the community...There are any place they sleep with women—under trees, on the road—it annoys the *tingane*. So they want to also punish us. That's why droughts and whatnot are happening...The youth now, when you tell them this thing is forbidden they say: "Oh, why is it forbidden?" So they ignore them and these are the very things that will happen. Ignoring the taboos by the youth...These are the very things that annoy the *tingana* and they remove themselves from whatever evil may be coming to the community... There are some places people use foreign drinks to pour libation...but that should not be the case, it should be the local *pito*, *daamolega*. But people have ignored those...they build a church, they pour libation and probably will be using whisky or whatnot, the foreign drink...Since you are pouring the libation, you have to use the local drink to give them because they are aware of the local drink, not the foreign drink. So lots of the old people they get drunk and they are unable to remember the tradition.¹⁰⁷

It is this concatenation of interpretations and the elders' ability to shift back and forth between the competing perspectives of the living and the dead that account for recent weather fluctuations in Northern Ghana. Within a short while you may be expecting a heavy downfall but it turns out to be a rainstorm. A village does not get rain, and yet it is very stormy.¹⁰⁸ Sometimes whole communities, and especially the present generation of the youth, refuse to acknowledge the authority and jurisdiction vested in parental agencies, channeled through the socio-ecological relations mobilized by Gurensi ancestorhood. Even though the human bodies of parents perish, the authority they wielded—and which enabled them to be both protective and persecutory because this is

how parents appear to their children when they exercise authority—persists within the earth-based jurisdiction of the *tingane*. Climate change is thus a contemporary reminder of both the transience of authority and the dangers of opposition to it.¹⁰⁹

This example decolonizes Western sociological terms. *Tindaanas*, chiefs, and elders rarely spoke in terms of binaries such as “tradition” vs. “development,” as if these were irreconcilable pairs of opposites. Instead, they reiterated how the ancestors would welcome development and modernization if the latter conformed to the invisible governances of the earth gods. The ancestors are aware that development usually involves cutting trees, digging up the earth to erect schools and hospitals, and opening quarries. However, in order to proceed with development, the *tindaana*, the chief, and the elders have to be consulted. If there is a problem, an earth shrine can be re-sited. A purification ritual will be performed, the *tindaana* will “cut the sod” and the development project can go on. This is a process of negotiation between competing interpretations whereby the “traditional” and mystical elements of Gurensi thought are not eradicated. On the contrary, animist thought is allowed to continually accommodate but also sometimes to adjust development and Westernization. Rather than secularization and “disenchantment,” a persistent re-enchantment occurs, whereby Western knowledge and techno-scientific developments are transformed into the matrix of mutuality of exchanges.

Rather than being passive recipients of Westernization and the globalization of Western productive forces, the *yaabas*’ adversity highlights the extent to which society and nature together continue to exercise influence over production, distribution, and consumption in the Upper East Region of Ghana. It shows the alternative rationalizations

that govern so-called “Third World” societies as they construct their own modernities. Rather than being primary, production here is revealed as one mode of reciprocal exchange between humans and nonhumans. In the West, production is conventionally conceived as primary—as in Marx and classical political economy—while exchange and distribution are viewed as consequences of production. In contrast, for both Zarathustra and the Gurensi, a wide variety of exchanges set the enabling condition of production: without proper relations with the earth no production is possible. The entire economy is best understood as a circulation system in which people, chiefs, *tindaanas*, and ancestors co-participate.¹¹⁰ Economy is refused as an autonomous domain: it is impossible to separate economic life from social life, ecological life, spiritual life, etc. This refusal of economy approximates Zarathustra’s existential self-artistry. If Zarathustra or the Gurensi *tindaana* do not act as entrepreneurs, preoccupied with ceaselessly increasing production to acquire profit by commercializing surplus goods, it is not because they do not know how to. It is because profit is not the only thing that interests them or they prefer to distribute surplus differently, converting it into spiritual and sensorial resources for addressing new crises of society.

Finally, the conversation between Zarathustra and the earth priest reveals these relations of reciprocal interdependence as *power* relations. There is a mutuality of obligations between the living and the ancestors, but as Fortes observes in the case of the Talensi, these obligations are not equal. Authority takes the form of a debt that mortal humans have to pay to an ever-renewing earth as gift-giving ancestors. The living count on the “dead” to come up with what Thoreau called “the gross necessities of life”: health, prosperity, rains, food, and the fertility of fields and women.¹¹¹ If this relationship

appears asymmetrical, it is because what is offered (for example, a calabash of millet flour or a fowl) is more of a token of respect in comparison with what is obtained in return.¹¹² Nietzsche's emphasis on agon and struggle reveals such reciprocity between humans and nonhumans as *agonistic* reciprocity. Here the Nietzsche-Gurensi dialogue might contribute to the contemporary debate about a new ethics of intergenerational justice and responsibility, especially with regard to climate change. One of the key challenges of generating such an ethic has been the problem with establishing relationships of reciprocity among successive human generations. African notions of indebtedness to the earth through reciprocating ancestors address this problem and offer a way to generate obligations or debt to the future *as* the past. Zarathustra's agonistic self-overcoming and critique of existential *ressentiment*, in turn, offer another way of receiving nature's perspectives on climate change as something other than ancestral retribution or punishment.¹¹³

Zarathustra might be speaking to such debates among environmentalists when he says: "Those who care most today ask: 'How are human beings to be preserved?' But Zarathustra is the only one and the first one to ask: 'How shall human being be *overcome*?'"¹¹⁴ The idea is to silence the preservation of the human species. Instead, Zarathustra encourages us to strive to cultivate a group of "overmen" who ward off resentment against the fragility of the human condition and rise above the insistence on externalizing collective responsibility and placing it on the otherworldly and on identifying culpable agents to punish every time humans suffer. Here I concur with William Connolly that if there is something admirable in such a rendering of the "overman," it has to be "dismantled as a distinct caste of solitary individuals and folded

into the political fabric of late-modern society.” The idea is to enlarge it as a voice among us as we appreciate the “intensive entanglement of everyone with everyone else.”¹¹⁵ A book for anyone and no one.

As preservation and overcoming are now drawn closer together by the global ecological crisis, Zarathustra’s overman as a distinct type cannot eliminate from its process of ethical self-formation some of the existing modalities of what it means to be “human” rendered visible by the earth priest. For Connolly, then, the overman becomes refigured into a struggle within the self between the inclination to existential resentment and punishment, on the one hand, and gratitude for the abundance of the earth that rises above this tendency, on the other.¹¹⁶ The dialogue with the earth priest, I think, can be understood as an ethico-political strategy that shifts the center of gravity from such solitary figures to society. It can fold Nietzschean agonism into the fabric of everyday life by attending to the more-than-human character of the latter while harmonizing its inexorable struggles. The dialogue affords a break both with the spirit of Nietzsche’s overman and with African identifications of indebtedness with punishment in order to advance and sustain an intergenerational ethics of collective responsibility and climate justice.

In the next section, we will explore a possible reversal of this agon-harmony emphasis. We will take a look at Zarathustra’s attempts to encourage serpents, people, and eagles alike to weave reciprocal forbearance and presumptive generosity into their relations with each other. We will contrast Zarathustra’s strategies towards harmonization with the expertise of the Gurensi chief of medicine who is also enmeshed in a struggle of socio-natural forces. Antagonism across species can be rechanneled into agonistic respect

as each party comes to appreciate the extent to which its interpretation and perspective is bound up with and animated by others'. The dialogue opens up new possibilities for negotiating cultural and ecological differences: it helps identify traces in the other of one's distinct way of interpreting the environment upon which humans and nonhumans conjointly act. Together perspectivism and animism compel a politics and ethics of agonistic respect based on acknowledgment of human complicity in climate change, the need for a gift-giving ethos between people and the earth, and the ambivalent place of punishment in intergenerational relations.

KNOWLEDGE AS ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: TOWARDS A COMMUNICATIVE INTERSPECIES ETHICS

The most important task for human beings is not to search the stars to converse with cosmic beings but to learn to communicate with the other species that share this planet with us. The real communication challenge at this level of interspecies communication is for we humans to learn to communicate with other species on their terms, in their own languages, or in common terms, if there are any.

VAL PLUMWOOD, *Environmental Culture*

On our way to visit the chief of medicine (*BagenabaSɔ*) we stop by a small “family spot”—the common name for a bar in Ghana—to buy a six-pack of Guinness. *BagenabaSɔ* does not charge for his services, the elder explains, but it is customary to show up with a gift, and Guinness is his drink of choice. Upon arrival at the chief's compound we park our motos right next to the chief's colossal *tampugere*, the rubbish heap in front of Gurensi earthen compounds whose size indicates the wealth of a household. A couple of vultures walk around the *tampugere* and scrutinize our group closely. *BagenabaSɔ* is a wealthy and powerful man, the elder continues, as we pass by

the chief's brand-new car, which he received as a gift from a grateful patient from the south of Ghana. The chief of medicine has eleven wives, all of whom have borne him children. People flock to his compound from all over Ghana and West Africa, soliciting his treatment for madness, epilepsy, blindness, stroke, and other types of illnesses. Some patients come from as far as Niger, as in the recent case of a man with sores all over his legs; he had tried to treat them for ten years without success. Others are victims of a witch planting a pot of *pito* in their bodies that eternally demands to be filled up. Only few healers like *BagenabaSɔ* are reputed to have the powers to remove such pots.

BagenabaSɔ tells us that he inherited the spirits from the ancestors. The spirits selected him from among his father's many children to take over custody of the family gods. His knowledge of herbs is also a "god-given gift," whose healing powers are interdependent with the unceasing abundance and generosity of the giving environment. The herbs can be obtained only from a distant forest and cannot be cultivated in the village: "The herbs are always available all the time in the forest...if you plant them here, they will not thrive, they will not grow but they are there all the time."¹⁷ There are "some sicknesses that herbs do not accept" and the chief refers such patients to the local hospital. For instance, he sometimes sends a patient to the hospital to get a blood transfusion, after which the person comes back for the rest of the treatment. Unlike many herbalists in Ghana, whose expertise is dismissed by medical doctors, *BagenabaSɔ* has a good working relationship with the hospital. Orthodox drugs and herbalists' drugs often heal in the same way, he explains, but when it comes to getting to know the depth of a sickness modern medications and the lab sometimes "cannot tell" because what they are dealing with are actually spiritual sicknesses.



Herbs



Vultures watching over treatments

The chief of medicine is a medium, a bridge between the sick and natural agencies: “The spirits are like wind or water and speak to me in my mind, directing me what to do. I give herbs but they carry out the treatment...they are natural forces, I don’t see them but yet I hear when they speak.”¹¹⁸ The spirits are air, wind, water, and only the chief can interpret what they are saying. It is nature who treats and all treatments take place at a “central healing shrine,” where the sick go first for consultation. The shrine consists of a slender tree wrapped in numerous bloodstained ropes and an earthen mound covered with the bones, shells, bangles, and the feathers of sacrificed animals. According to the chief, the spirits instructed him to build the shrine and the tree. Once the spirits have diagnosed a patient, *BagenabaSo* is usually instructed to kill a fowl or perform some kind of sacrifice. During the sacrifice he puts a tiny rope around the neck of the animal, which the slaughter stains with blood. The rope is removed and hung on the tree. The spirits then “pick the blood” and proceed with a treatment. The tree is the medical record of whoever comes in: “when someone is healed I go to write the name on that tree.”



BagenabaSo's Central Shrine and Guardian Bird

Unlike the *tingane's* economies of gift giving, this is a treacherous economy of replacement and exchange: “the spirits take blood because, for example, when a witch gets someone they take the person’s blood—just that we human beings do not see it with our eyes but the spirits do—this is why the spirits too take blood of the animals in exchange to save the person’s soul.”¹¹⁹ In such precarious environments the violence of malevolent agencies remains ever-present and has to be repeatedly displaced by the conjoint efforts of nature and the chief to keep witches at bay. Vultures feed in and fly over the chief’s compound, guarding and watching over whatever treatments he may be carrying out. Another guardian bird, a white egret, remained perched on the top of the tree at the central shrine for more than two hours during our interview, attentively surveying the inner courtyard and the shrine’s surroundings.

Like the chief of medicine's cross-species healing collective, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* natural beings and forces reciprocate the receptive and dialogical stance that Zarathustra adopts with respect to them. Early on, Zarathustra realizes that a successful self-overcoming requires aides and companions, not a herd of passive followers: "I need living companions who follow me because they want to follow themselves—wherever I want. It dawned on me: let Zarathustra speak not to the people, but instead to companions!"¹²⁰ Companionship implies a diversity of perspectives and subject positions: it involves collaborators whose centers of agency are tangled with Zarathustra's agency. It doesn't take long before his two closest companions, the snake and the eagle, find him:

Thus Zarathustra had spoken to his heart when the sun stood at noon, then he gazed at the sky with a questioning look, for above him he heard the sharp cry of a bird. And behold! An eagle cut broad circles through the air, and upon it hung a snake, *not as prey but as a friend*, for the snake curled itself around the eagle's neck. "It is my animals!" said Zarathustra, and his heart was delighted. "The proudest animal under the sun and the wisest animal under the sun – they have gone forth to scout. They want to determine whether Zarathustra is still alive. Indeed, am I still alive? I found it more dangerous among human beings than among animals; Zarathustra walks dangerous paths. May my animals guide me!"... "May I be wiser! May I be wise from the ground up like my snake!"¹²¹

This is a strange image: the serpent coiled around the neck of the eagle. Conventionally, the snake and the eagle are represented as opponents and the eagle holds the serpent in his claws, depicting the conflict between spirit and matter.¹²² The eagle, an animal living in the air, approximates spirit because it is a winged being. The snake is associated with the heaviness of the earth: she has no legs and cannot fly, and she can only creep on her belly in the dirt. Zarathustra's new companions reverse this age-old symbolism: "upon it hung a snake, *not as prey but as a friend*." The snake is lifted up in the air, away from her abode where she is at the mercy of the eagle. Yet, it is dangerous for the eagle to have

such a necktie: one squeeze of his neck or one bite can bring both of them down. Rather than being irreconcilable opposites, spirit and matter subsist in precarious inter-involvement. This is a powerful image of the co-dependency and companionship of species.¹²³

Zarathustra adopts a posture of openness and willingness to acknowledge his new companions as fellow agents: “I found it more dangerous among human beings than among animals; Zarathustra walks dangerous paths. May my animals guide me!” His enterprise is dangerous: by letting the animals guide him he becomes “lifted out” of his human-centered element into a world of dangerous confrontation of forces. If we were to attempt to live in an entirely spiritual medium, the body would suffer; inasmuch the body suffers so does the mind. One needs a great deal of wisdom to make such a journey safely: “May I be wiser! May I be wise from the ground up like my snake!” One needs the wisdom of the snake, the chthonic wisdom of the earth, which cannot be mobilized when one is out of touch with the hormones and tissues of one’s body.¹²⁴ The structure of many snakes is designed to allow them to expand beyond their ordinary limits, which would otherwise be set by the beings in their surroundings that they must swallow to survive. Self-overcoming requires the cultivation of a snake-like ability to expand beyond one’s bodily limits and to discern the extent to which one species’ interpretation is intertwined with others’. It also means that wisdom glides slowly, generating knowledge that is digested “at the gut level”: “Snakes move almost noiselessly; wisdom approaches in the same way.”¹²⁵

As a personification of the chthonic force of gravity, the snake highlights Nietzsche’s complex understanding of gravity’s key role and its interaction with other

forces in the universe. *Zarathustra* abounds in different personifications of the figure of gravity: devil, dwarf, buffoon, ape, camel, etc. Gravity is conventionally portrayed as a negative and reactive force that holds us down; it is a grave and somber mood opposed to lightness. As such, it keeps us at the bearing stage of the camel and denotes the foreign and extra weight human beings impose on themselves as they turn life into a desert: “only the human being is a heavy burden to himself. This is because he lugs too much that is foreign to him. Like a camel he kneels down and allows himself to be well burdened.”¹²⁶ In *The Dance Song* the spirit of gravity is described as the devil and the “ruler of the world.”¹²⁷

Yet gravity is also the force that keeps us bounded to the earth, without which we would be disembodied. It is the enabling condition of becoming: “Where I once again found my old devil and arch-enemy, the spirit of gravity, and everything he created: compulsion, statute, necessity and consequence and purpose and will and good and evil: For must there not exist something over which one dances, dances away?”¹²⁸ Regardless of how far Zarathustra ascends and how many new tablets he creates, there will always be a ground force of “old gravity” that humans can never transcend. In a world of becoming one day even the new values will lose their creative elasticity and will be replaced by yet newer ones. Self-overcoming requires that one become one’s own center of gravity while remaining cognizant of the meaning of the earth at the level of old gravity: “Are you a new strength and a new right? A first movement? A wheel rolling out of itself?”¹²⁹ In *On the Three Metamorphoses*, the third, final metamorphosis of becoming-child is described as such a “first movement” and “a wheel rolling out of itself.”¹³⁰ Creating oneself anew involves innocence, forgetting, and becoming a child again. It is a form of autopoiesis

(“rolling out of itself”) that requires regular recycling and renewal of energy and the destruction of the old in the process of overcoming: “You must want to burn yourself up in your own flame: how could you become new if you did not first become ashes!”¹³¹ Self-overcoming becomes one of the principles of the ecological becoming of the world.

This agonistic intercourse between Zarathustra and various personifications of gravity involve a new form of interspecies dialogue. This is a form of knowledge that inheres in human-nonhuman relationships and practical activities. It is a form of knowledge that Zarathustra shares with the Gurensi chief of medicine, whose transactions with spirits and guardian birds also reveal agency and intentionality. Every event or sickness is understood as an action, or better, as an interaction between natural forces and bodies. This does not mean that Zarathustra and *BagenabaSɔ* first personify other entities and then socialize with them. Both personify forces and beings *as* they socialize with them.

At the register of philosophical thinking, this practice of personification involves a corollary practice of materialization of abstract categories and ideas. Animism and perspectivism accord a physical, often animate, material aspect to what others in the West may consider abstract ideas. The chief of medicine removes a pot of *pito* planted in one’s body that eternally demands to be filled up, rather than treat alcoholism. Zarathustra talks of a serpent that coils around the eagle’s neck, rather than of gravitation as a universal force of attraction between all physical matter.¹³²

Giving living dimensions to abstract ideas becomes necessary when to know means to *personify* and to *relate* rather than to *objectify*. According to Nurit Bird-David, this is a “relational epistemology” that troubles the modernist epistemologies that

organize much of contemporary Euro-American environmentalism. The world becomes known as lived, from a related point of view, within the shifting horizons of related interpreters:

If “cutting trees into parts” epitomizes the modernist epistemology, “talking with trees,” I argue, epitomizes...animistic epistemology. “Talking” is short-hand for a two-way responsive relatedness with a tree—rather than “speaking” one-way to it, as if it could listen and understand. “Talking with” stands for attentiveness to variances and invariances in behavior and response of things in states of relatedness and for getting to know such things as they change through the vicissitudes over time of the engagement with them. To “talk with a tree”—rather than “cut it down”—is to perceive what *it* does as one acts towards it, being aware concurrently of changes in oneself and the tree. It is expecting response and responding, growing into mutual responsiveness, and, furthermore, possibly into mutual responsibility.¹³³

“Talking with” is attentiveness. “Knowledge” means the cultivation of skills of sharing the world with other beings and forces. It grows from and *is* maintaining relatedness with human and nonhuman others.¹³⁴ An example would be the two-way responsive relatedness of elders and baobab trees: “the tree is saying that you have to perform sacrifices to it. ‘Give me a goat or a cow, give me a shirt or a smock.’ So you have to!”

Is this, then, metaphorical? Yes. But the metaphor of conversation moves us closer to a world of differential modes of experience than do the metaphors of blind causality. Nietzsche states that we indispensably find ourselves drawing upon “bold” metaphors: “To begin with a nerve stimulus is transferred into an image: first metaphor. The image, in turn, is imitated in a sound: second metaphor. And each time there is a complete overleaping of one sphere, right into the middle of an entirely new and different one.”¹³⁵ Interpretation across distances always has a metaphorical dimension to it. Which metaphors? That is the question. Not whether. In contrast to Gurensi elders, Zarathustra has to work hard to maintain openness to non-humans as potentially reciprocating and

communicative. In “On the Adder’s Bite” Zarathustra falls asleep beneath a fig tree. An adder comes along and bites him in the neck. Once the serpent recognizes Zarathustra, she tries to flee:

“Not so fast,” spoke Zarathustra. “You have not yet accepted my thanks! You waked me in time, my way is still long.” “Your way is still short,” said the adder sadly: “My poison kills.” Zarathustra smiled. “Since when did a dragon ever die of snake poison?” he said. “But take back your poison! You are not rich enough to give it to me.” Then the snake fell upon his neck once again and licked his wound.¹³⁶

At first the adder goes straight for Zarathustra’s throat, the organ of speech, reminding him that his teachings have devolved into monologues, rather than cross-species dialogues. Once Zarathustra shifts his attentiveness from his own state of suffering to the snake’s perspective and shows agonistic respect for her related point of view, a sense of mutual relatedness becomes restored.

Together Zarathustra and the elders accentuate “we-ness” through a pathos of distance. It accommodates and negotiates differences, rather than “otherness,” which eclipses affinities across differences.¹³⁷ They make it possible to imagine alliances across species that de-emphasize the importance of abstract and stereotypical species frameworks and open doors to new kinds of inter-species communicative experiences and ethics. This new dialogical ethics can be conceived as both intergenerational and interspecies, spanning several generations of custodians of the family gods, of *yaaba-tiisi* and sacred groves, and of disciples, companions, and overmen. Knowledge of the world is not rewritten merely as a human’s self-knowledge or generation of sensorial wealth. Rather, knowledge is distributed among all those who interact with humans, be it trees, groves, snakes, eagles, air, wind, or water. Knowledge is best understood not as a set of essential specifications of personhood that are “passed down” from generation to

generation but as heightened perceptual sensitivity that reveals the earth as life-generating ancestors.¹³⁸ The source of knowledge is not in the heads of the ancestors or in Zarathustra's mind but in the giving environment they guide us through. Perhaps the Kasena proverb says it best: *Bu-veila koe ka nyena*; the roving child is older than its parent.¹³⁹

EPILOGUE

This chapter has staged a series of encounters between a minor tradition of Euro-American political theory and ethnography in Ghana in order to explore new forms of experiential exchange and interspecies ethics. Such ethics, I have argued, are not merely relevant for African villages. The dialogue between Nietzsche's pan-perspectivism and African animism prompts us to reflect on the evolving ways in which people have understood and related to the earth and "natural resources" and on the ways in which the earth and "resources" have responded and continue to respond in the age of climate change. If animism and perspectivism are not only sets of beliefs but also modes of perception immanent to relations with earthen beings and forces, are they something that we do? If so, does that mean we can't understand it unless we do it? My intuition is that the virtual encounter between Zarathustra and the earth priest renders more perceptible what we have been doing all along. The encounter troubles the anthropocentric presumption that humans always have to speak on behalf of nonhumans, or that the latter always need the former to empower them to speak. For Nietzsche and the earth priest, human-environment interactions are less a question of translation or representation and

more an issue of becoming attuned to an ongoing exchange of interpretations and perspectives. Nature is already speaking. Are we listening and responding appropriately? Together perspectivism and animism provide a cross-cultural blueprint for responding to ecological problems: What if we understood hurricanes as votes on corporate-driven energy policies? Or as the ancestors' enunciations of radical calls to political action and ethical reform? Do droughts constitute the earth's verdicts on degrading practices of modernization and development?

I have sought to prioritize the everyday situations, critical events, and face-to-face interactions between people and the environment that form the texture of lived experience, and thus to pursue political thinking from the earth up. While it is certainly edifying for environmental political theory to enter into conversations with the Greeks or Nietzsche, the global ecological crisis makes it critical to learn more about the ecological practices of those who seem most distant and "alien" to us in the world in which we presently live. By sojourning among them it becomes possible to explore the value not merely of abstract knowledge *of* the other but of communication *with* the other, be it the African earth priest or the baobab tree that responds to his pleas.¹⁴⁰ Here the ethnographic method can be understood not only as a set of interdisciplinary research techniques that we have to acquire but also as a "commonplace body of social skills we already possess" (such as the protocols of reciprocity that govern relationships with others).¹⁴¹ Ethnography as a technique of thinking enables us to take part in a web of ongoing interactions between humans and nonhumans by using one's body as others do. It is a way of trying on more-than-human perspectives and identities, and of displacing

anthropocentric habits of perception. It allows us to adopt a view from in-between, reducible neither to one's own perspective nor to those of others.¹⁴²

Whereas ethnography enlists bodily immersion to sensitize us to the various interdependencies between humans and the earth, Nietzsche relies on a style of cinematic writing to produce textual effects that advance such earth-bound sensibilities. Nietzsche shifts back and forth between grammars of things/beings and forces/processes, between intellectual processes and bodily processes. Through the use of metaphors, parables, and stories Zarathustra gives corporeal fullness back to the philosophical process and unravels depths of human-environment intercourse that have been previously hidden from us. Like ethnography, cinematic writing stages encounters that disrupt familiar versions of worlds. Together they forge negotiations between Western and African thought that open new doors to experimenting with augmenting the socio-cultural register of human perception. They heighten our awareness of being enmeshed in a web of interdependencies and conversations between humans, plants, animals, minerals, and a reciprocating earth.

¹ Gurensi chief, interview by Anatoli Ignatov, Jacqueline Ignatova, and Chris Azaare, December 12, 2012.

² In this chapter I build on some of Stephen Gudeman's insights about African economic models of nature as a reciprocating ancestor. See Stephen Gudeman, *Economics as Culture: Models and Metaphors of Livelihood* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 90-109. I am also indebted to Nurit Bird-David for the term "giving environment," which she uses to refer to the economic metaphors of the Nayaka people predicated upon their view of the environment as giving. See Nurit Bird-David, "The Giving Environment: Another Perspective on the Economic System of Gatherer-Hunters," *Current Anthropology* 31, no. 2 (Apr., 1990): 189-96.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 65.

⁴ Herman Daly, *Ecological Economics and Sustainable Development* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2007), 13.

⁵ C. J. Jung, *Nietzsche's Zarathustra: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1934-1939 by C.G. Jung*, ed. James L. Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 869, 903-4.

⁶ Jung, *Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, 870.

⁷ Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 41-43.

⁸ Notable exceptions here include: Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003); Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Barbara Smuts, "Encounters with Animal Minds," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8, nos. 5-7 (2001): 293-309; Cary Wolfe, ed., *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

⁹ Wolfgang Sachs, "Environment," in *The Development Dictionary*, ed. Wolfgang Sachs (London: Zed Books, 2010), 35.

¹⁰ See also Elizabeth Croll and David Parkin, "Cultural Understandings of the Environment," in *Bush Base: Forest Farm*, ed. Elizabeth Croll and David Parkin (London: Routledge, 1992), 11-36.

¹¹ Fikret Berkes, *Sacred Ecology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 287.

¹² Here I build on Tim Ingold's critique of anthropological models of cultural "adaptation" to a distinctly conceived "natural" environment. Ingold draws on J. J. Gibson's ecological approach to perception to trouble such nature/culture demarcations and to highlight the "mutualism of person and environment" enabled by people's direct perception of the environment in the course of their practical activities and interactions. See Tim Ingold, "Culture and the Perception of the Environment," in *Bush Base: Forest Farm*, eds. Elizabeth Croll and David Parkin (London: Routledge, 1992), 39-56.

¹³ Rane Willerslev, "Laughing at the Spirits in North Siberia: Is Animism Being Taken Too Seriously?," *E-flux* 36 (07/2012): 13-22. For two "classic" accounts of animism as a set of metaphoric projections of human society onto nature see Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (London: J. Murray, 1871) and Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: New Press, 1995). Notable examples of the "new animism" approach to socio-cultural anthropology include: Nurit Bird-David, "'Animism' Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology," *Current Anthropology* 40, no. S1, Special Issue Culture—A Second Chance? (February 1999): S67-S91; Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013); and Laura Rival, "The Materiality of Life: Revisiting the Anthropology of Nature in Amazonia," *Indiana* 29 (2012): 127-43.

¹⁴ Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), xvii, xxi.

¹⁵ See Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000), 112.

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), #636, 339-40.

¹⁷ William Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 34-35.

¹⁸ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, WP # 678, 359-60.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, #681, 361; "A multiplicity of forces, connected by a common mode of nutrition, we call 'life.' To this mode of nutrition, as a means of making it possible, belong all so-called feelings, ideas, thoughts; i.e., (1) a resistance to all other forces; (2) an adjustment of the same according to form and rhythm; (3) an estimate in regard to assimilation or excretion" (#641, 341-42).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, #641, 341-2.

²¹ "The will to power *interprets*...it defines limits, determines degrees, variations of power. Mere variations of power could not feel themselves to be such: there must be present something that wants to grow and interprets the value of whatever else wants to grow...interpretation is itself a means of becoming master of something" (Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #643, 342). See also Alphonso Lingis, "The Will to Power," in *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, ed. David B. Allison (New York: Delta, 1977), 41-44.

²² Lingis, "The Will to Power," 51.

²³ *Ibid.*, 41. "Pathos of distance" is a complex term used by Nietzsche to refer to the creative tension of competing perspectives whereby each maintains a posture of respect for the adversary, partly because the

relationship reveals the contingent orientations of both. A pathos of distance is essential to the exercise of power over oneself in a way that politicizes the distances from those with whom one is engaged:

Without that *pathos of distance* which grows out of the ingrained difference between strata-when the ruling caste constantly looks afar and looks down upon subjects and instruments and just as constantly practices obedience and command, keeping down and keeping at a distance-that other, more mysterious pathos could not have grown up either-the craving for an ever new widening of distances within the soul itself, the development of ever higher, rarer, more remote, further-stretching, more comprehensive states-in brief, simply the enhancement of the type "man," the continual "self-overcoming of man," to use a moral formula in a supra-moral sense. (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann [New York: Vintage, 1989], # 257, 201)

An antagonism in which each pursues initially the conquest or conversion of the other becomes converted into an agonism in which each treats the other as crucial to herself in the strife and interdependence of identity and difference. For an illuminating reading of Nietzsche's pathos of distance as integral to a pluralist ethics of democracy, see Chapter 6 "Democracy and Distance" of William E. Connolly's *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 158-97.

²⁴ Eduardo Batalha Viveiros de Castro, "Nature: The World as Affect and Perspective," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Masterclass Series 1 (2012): 112.

²⁵ Eduardo Batalha Viveiros de Castro, "Exchanging Perspectives: The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Ontologies," *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 466.

²⁶ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #540, 291.

²⁷ Viveiros de Castro, "Exchanging Perspectives," 465.

²⁸ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #481, 267.

²⁹ Jean Granier, "Perspectivism and Interpretation," in *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, ed. David B. Allison (New York: Delta, 1977), 193-4.

³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1989), II, 12, 77.

³¹ "Increase in 'dissimulation' proportionate to the rising order of rank of creatures. It seems to be lacking in the inorganic world-power against power, quite crudely-cunning begins in the organic world; plants are already masters of it... The perspective of all organic functions, all the strongest instincts of life: the force in all life that *wills* error; error as the precondition even of thought. Before there is 'thought' there must have been 'invention'; the *construction* of identical cases, of the appearance of sameness, is more primitive than the *knowledge* of sameness" (Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #544, 292-3).

³² Here I am indebted to Alfonso Lingis for his illuminating discussion of Nietzsche's notion of Will to Power. See Lingis, "The Will to Power," 42-45.

³³ Eduardo Batalha Viveiros de Castro, "Culture: The Universal Animal," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Masterclass Series 1 (2012): 99.

³⁴ Eduardo Batalha Viveiros de Castro, "Cosmologies: Perspectivism," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Masterclass Series 1 (2012): 71.

³⁵ Viveiros de Castro, "Exchanging perspectives," 470.

³⁶ Viveiros de Castro, "Exchanging perspectives," 470; Viveiros de Castro, "Cosmologies: Perspectivism," 58.

³⁷ Viveiros de Castro, "Culture: The Universal Animal," 99.

³⁸ Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 14, 304.

³⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, I, 13, 45.

⁴⁰ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 9.

⁴¹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #636, 340

⁴² Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 23.

⁴³ Viveiros de Castro, "Nature: The World as Affect and Perspective," 114.

⁴⁴ Viveiros de Castro, "Exchanging Perspectives," 475.

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- ⁴⁵ Marilyn Strathern, *Property, Substance and Effect: Anthropological Essays on Persons and Things* (London: The Athlone Press, 1999), 240, 250-2.
- ⁴⁶ Lingis, "The Will to Power," 39.
- ⁴⁷ Harry Garuba, "Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society," *Public Culture* 15, no. 2 (2003): 267.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 283. "Pan-psychism" refers to a set of philosophical approaches that extend mind, psyche, or consciousness to all existence, including the inorganic world. Notable works include: Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, and Selected Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley, ed. Seymour Feldman (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992); Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: Corrected Edition*, eds. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978). For a contemporary articulation of pan-psychism within environmental philosophy, see Freya Mathews, *For Love of Matter: A Contemporary Panpsychism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003).
- ⁴⁹ Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 54.
- ⁵⁰ Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the Modern World*, 52-54.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 65, 122.
- ⁵² Strathern, *Property, Substance and Effect*, 239. Of course, here one might object: how are these perspectives not "projections" of humanity? My goal is to emphasize how the nonhuman impinges on the human and the extent to which human interpretations can be understood as reactions, formed partly by the nonhuman. Maybe they are projections in part but ones that are more-than-human.
- ⁵³ Strathern, *Property, Substance and Effect*, 249-50.
- ⁵⁴ Igor Kopytoff, "Ancestors as Elders in Africa," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 41, no. 2 (April 1971): 133, 139.
- ⁵⁵ Strathern, *Property, Substance and Effect*, 251.
- ⁵⁶ Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo Batalha. "Supernature: Under the Gaze of the Other," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Masterclass Series 1 (2012): 136.
- ⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Prologue, 6.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., 9.
- ⁵⁹ Graham Parkes, "Staying Loyal to the Earth: Nietzsche as an Ecological Thinker," in *Nietzsche's Futures*, ed. John Lippit (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 171.
- ⁶⁰ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Prologue, 7.
- ⁶¹ Vanessa Lemm, "Justice and Gift-Giving in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*," in *Nietzsche's Thus Spoke Zarathustra: Before Sunrise*, ed. James Luchte (London: Continuum, 2008), 169-70.
- ⁶² Hyde, *The Gift*, xi, xiv.
- ⁶³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), #4, 219.
- ⁶⁴ Gary Shapiro, "The Metaphysics of Presents: Nietzsche's Gift, the Debt to Emerson, Heidegger's Values," in *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, ed. Alan D. Shrift (New York: Routledge, 1997), 275; Hyde, *The Gift*, 5, 8.
- ⁶⁵ What kind of speaker? Zarathustra is not a prophet or a preacher: "here no 'prophet' is speaking, none of those gruesome hybrids of sickness and will to power whom people call founders of religions...this is not 'preaching'; no *faith* is demanded here: from an infinite abundance of light and depth of happiness falls drop upon drop, word upon word" (Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 219-20).
- ⁶⁶ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 110; Martin Heidegger, "Who is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?" in *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, ed. David B. Allison (New York: Delta, 1977), 64.
- ⁶⁷ Heidegger, "Who is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?," 65.
- ⁶⁸ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 55.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., 55-56.
- ⁷⁰ In Zoroastrian traditions, Mithra was the lord of fire, believed to accompany the sun in its daily course across the sky gazing down to see who upheld the covenant and who broke it. See Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 1979), 9.
- ⁷¹ "Mithraism," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed January 18, 2014.

< <http://escola.britannica.com.br/article/53039/Mithraism?view=print> >

⁷² Hyde, *The Gift*, 16.

⁷³ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 159.

⁷⁴ Lemm, "Justice and Gift-Giving in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*," 171.

⁷⁵ Hyde, *The Gift*, 21.

⁷⁶ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 57. The power of the gift is obscure, its boundaries are fuzzy, and it may be too unstable a force to be possessed or mastered effectively. Gift relations occur within a field of power relations, within which power differentials are continuously shifting.

⁷⁷ Hyde, *The Gift*, 16, 84.

⁷⁸ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 4.

⁷⁹ Shapiro, "The Metaphysics of Presents," 281.

⁸⁰ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 58.

⁸¹ Ibid., 68. It is also possible that gift giving maintains power symmetries; that is, a plurality of wills to power that are not totalizable in a state of peace or harmony.

⁸² Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, I/22, p. 57.

⁸³ Herman E. Daly, *Steady-State Economics* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1991), 12.

⁸⁴ "The closer the economy approaches the scale of the whole Earth, the more it will have to conform to the physical behavior mode of the Earth. That behavior mode is a steady state—a system that permits qualitative development but not aggregate quantitative growth" (Herman Daly, "Big Idea: Steady-State Economy," *Adbusters*, 17 December 2008).

⁸⁵ Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 16-17. Despite these apparent affinities between Nietzsche and Plumwood, it seems to me that Zarathustra is speaking more about the otherworldliness of the weak than to a notion of human autonomy. What concerns him are the fantasies that have nature, god, or the cosmos designed for human flourishing.

⁸⁶ Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 11.

⁸⁷ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 151.

⁸⁸ Jung, *Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, 436-8.

⁸⁹ "It is an earthly virtue that I love: there is little prudence in it and least of all the reason of the many. But this bird built its nest in my house, therefore I love and caress it, now it sits next to me on its golden eggs" (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 25). The earthly virtue has little prudence and common sense; the latter are forms of exclusion of ways of living that do not conform to conventions and established norms. When one deals with things to which one cannot give a name, prudence and common sense are of little service. The earthly virtue is described as a bird, a gift from nature that comes to Zarathustra who now has to wait for the bird's eggs to be hatched. If a bird has built a nest in your home, she intends to stay. A bird is an air being which suggests that the body Zarathustra speaks of is not without a spirit. Earthly virtue contains spiritual power in it; it endows spirit with a physical habitation (Jung, *Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, 428-31). This interlocking of spirit within matter or the merger of the material and the metaphorical brings Zarathustra's gift-giving virtue closer to African animist thought.

⁹⁰ In the case of the *tinkugere*, "the whole community can say: 'this is our fore-fore-forefathers.'" (Gurensi chief and elders, interview by Anatoli Ignatov, Jacqueline Ignatov, and Christopher Azaare, December 12, 2012).

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Wyatt Macgaffey, *Chiefs, Priests, and Praise-Singers: History, Politics, and Land Ownership in Northern Ghana* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 80.

⁹³ Wyatt Macgaffey reports a similar set of observations with regard to prayer and sacrifice in Dagbon (Macgaffey, *Chiefs, Priests, and Praise-Singers*, 79-81). See also Igor Kopytoff, "Ancestors as Elders in Africa," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 41, no. 2 (April 1971): 129-142 and Michael Singleton, "Speaking to the Ancestors: Religion as Interlocutory Interaction," *Anthropos* 104 (2009): 311-22.

⁹⁴ Gurensi *tindaana*, interview by Anatoli Ignatov, Jacqueline Ignatova, and Christopher Azaare, November 10, 2012.

⁹⁵ Gurensi Chief and Elders, interview by Anatoli Ignatov, Jacqueline Ignatova, and Christopher Azaare, December 12, 2012.

⁹⁶ Meyer Fortes, *Religion, Morality and the person: Essays on Tallensi Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 23-26.

⁹⁷ Member of *Tindaanas'* Association, interview by Anatoli Ignatov and Jacqueline Ignatova, December 16, 2002

⁹⁸ Fortes, *Religion, morality and the person*, 29.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁰¹ Gudeman, *Economics as Culture*, 108.

¹⁰² Interview with Gurensi Chief and Elders, interview by Anatoli Ignatov and Christopher Azaare, September 21, 2012

¹⁰³ Gurensi *tindaana*, interview by Anatoli Ignatov, Jacqueline Ignatova, and Christopher Azaare, October 4, 2012

¹⁰⁴ Here many social scientists, and especially economists, may raise an objection: "What if scarcity, and not abundance, is the fact?" Scarcity is a key assumption and a "law of nature" of modern economics but the validity and universality of the assumption itself have been rarely interrogated. More recently, environmental economists have even used the term as a reference to biophysical limits and finite resources. In this chapter I reject such notions of scarcity as a natural given. Instead, following the school of post-development thought, I treat scarcity as an invention of the economic imagination that has served to facilitate the conversion and exploitation of nature as "natural resources" and—together with "poverty," another invention of development economics—to obscure the unequal distribution of resources worldwide. Rather, it becomes essential to address how and why market-based industrial systems institute scarcity. Here I concur with Gustavo Esteva that scarcity as a cultural construct is linked to the production of a paradoxical structure of human needs:

The sudden shortage of fresh air during a fire is not scarcity of air in the economic sense. Neither is the self-imposed frugality of a monk, the insufficiency of stamina in a boxer, the rarity of a flower, or the last reserves of wheat mentioned by Pharaoh in what is the first known historical reference to hunger. The 'law of scarcity' was construed by economists to denote the technical assumption that man's wants are great, not to say infinite, whereas his means are limited though improvable. The assumption implies choices over the allocation of means (resources). This 'fact' defines the 'economic problem' *par excellence*, whose 'solution' is proposed by economists through the market or the plan. Popular perception, especially in the Northern parts of the world, even shares this technical meaning of the word scarcity, assuming it to be a self-evident truism. But it is precisely the universality of this assumption that is no longer tenable (Gustavo Esteva, "Development," in *The Development Dictionary*, ed. Wolfgang Sachs [London: Zed Books, 2010], 16)

The pressure of necessity serves to put people to work, while the creation of indispensable mass demand occurs by exacerbating new needs. The same economic theory makes growth a condition for eliminating poverty. Such ideas of growth would be meaningless without needs and wants; no remedy to poverty will be needed without "plunging" whole societies into indigence first. Here the work of Marshall Sahlins and Pierre Clastres is particularly instructive. Both have explored the non-economic assumptions that govern the life of certain indigenous societies, which reject scarcity whenever it appears among them. They accentuate the socio-political control of "primitive" economies, according to the principles of underproductive sufficiency and the inhibition of accumulation by redistribution or ritual dilapidation of wealth. See Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (New York: Routledge, 2011) and Pierre Clastres, *Archaeology of Violence* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010), Ch. 8.

¹⁰⁵ Gurensi Chief and Elders, interview by Anatoli Ignatov, Jacqueline Ignatova, and Christopher Azaare, December 12, 2012. Here I may be overstating Zarathustra as an ecological thinker by saying things that Zarathustra doesn't. At times Zarathustra seems more concerned with giving to other humans, and specifically kindred spirits, rather than to the earth.

¹⁰⁶ Gudeman, *Economics as Culture*, 108.

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- ¹⁰⁷ Gurensi Chief and Elders, interview by Anatoli Ignatov, Jacqueline Ignatova, and Christopher Azaare, December 12, 2012
- ¹⁰⁸ Gurensi Chief and Elders, interview by Anatoli Ignatov, Jacqueline Ignatova, and Christopher Azaare, December 12, 2012
- ¹⁰⁹ Here I am indebted to Meyer Fortes and his illuminating analysis of ancestor worship as an aspect of citizenship in Talensi politico-jural domain. See Chapter 4 of *Religion, Morality and the Person*.
- ¹¹⁰ Gudeman, *Economics as Culture*, 101.
- ¹¹¹ Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 11-12.
- ¹¹² Singleton, "Speaking to the Ancestors," *Anthropos* 104 (2009): 320.
- ¹¹³ I thank Beth Mendenhall and Chad Shomura for drawing my attention to the various resonances between the Gurensi notion of indebtedness to the earth and the contestations over a new intergenerational ethics of responsibility for climate change.
- ¹¹⁴ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 232.
- ¹¹⁵ Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, 186-8.
- ¹¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹¹⁷ BagenabaSo, interview by Anatoli Ignatov and Jacqueline Ignatova, December 16, 2012.
- ¹¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹¹⁹ Ibid.
- ¹²⁰ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 14.
- ¹²¹ Ibid., 15-16.
- ¹²² Jung, *Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, 236.
- ¹²³ Ibid., 227-39.
- ¹²⁴ Ibid., 238-39.
- ¹²⁵ Swami Sivananda Radha, *Hatha Yoga: The Hidden Language, Symbols, Secrets and Metaphors* (Spokane, WA: Timeless Books, 2006), 145-7
- ¹²⁶ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, III/11, 154.
- ¹²⁷ Ibid., II/10, 83-84.
- ¹²⁸ Ibid., III/12, 158.
- ¹²⁹ Ibid., I/17, 46.
- ¹³⁰ Ibid., I/1, 17.
- ¹³¹ Ibid., I/17, 47.
- ¹³² Garuba, "Explorations in Animist Materialism," 272-4. African conceptions of physical illness as spiritual affliction resonate with Nietzsche's diagnosis of modern society: "modern society is no 'society,' no 'body,' but a sick conglomerate of chandalas - a society that no longer has the strength to excrete" (Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #50, 31-32)
- ¹³³ Bird-David, "'Animism' Revisited," 77.
- ¹³⁴ Ibid., 78.
- ¹³⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s*, trans. Daniel Breazeale (London: Humanities Press International, 1992), 82.
- ¹³⁶ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 50.
- ¹³⁷ Bird-David, "'Animism' Revisited," 78.
- ¹³⁸ Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, 146-7.
- ¹³⁹ Albert Awedoba, *An Introduction to Kasena Society and Culture Through Their Proverbs* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000), 173.
- ¹⁴⁰ Michael Jackson, *Lifeworlds: Essays in Existential Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 251-69.
- ¹⁴¹ Ibid., 262.
- ¹⁴² Ibid., 256.

Chapter 4

Practices of Eco-Sensation: Opening Doors of Perception to the Nonhuman



Landscapes must be painted with the eyes and not with the prejudices that are in our heads.

PABLO PICASSO, *Landscape*

Whether through words, colors, sounds, or stone, art is the language of sensations.

DELEUZE AND GUATTARI, *What is Philosophy?*

Take a lump of sugar: It has a spatial configuration. But if we approach it from that angle, all we will ever grasp are differences in degree between that sugar and any other thing. But it also has a duration, a rhythm of duration, a way of being in time that is at least partially revealed in the process of its dissolving, and that shows how this sugar differs in kind not only from other things, but first and foremost from itself. In this respect, Bergson's famous formulation, "I must wait until the sugar dissolves" has a still broader meaning than is given to it by its context. It signifies that my own duration, such as I live it in the impatience of waiting, for example, serves to reveal other durations that beat to other rhythms that differ in kind from mine. Duration is always the location and the environment of differences in kind; it is even their totality and multiplicity.

GILLES DELEUZE, *Bergsonism*

INTRODUCTION

In chapter 3 I experimented with a conversation between Nietzsche's Zarathustra and the Gurensi earth priest, two profoundly ecological thinkers who show us that to think ecologically means to allow thinking to unfold within the concrete materiality and affectivity of the earth. The conversation between perspectivism and animism encourages us to become more sensitive to the latent elements in the "inflow" of experience and to

the rich texture of interspecies interactions and communication concealed by anthropocentric habits of human perception. The earth and all existence—human as well as plant, mineral, and animal—were revealed as interdependent processes and dynamic constellations of “becoming” propelled by continuous exchanges of gifts and perspectives. The chapter raised a question of technique or method: how to connect more sensitively with nonhuman bodies and forces? How to register more effectively the expressivity and responsiveness of the earth? Through what techniques can human experiences of natural forces be modulated, intensified, or “wasted?” How does the body function in the process?

This chapter addresses these questions by staging encounters between political theory and earthworks, ranging from Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* in Utah’s Great Salt Lake to the earthen houses of the Gurense people of Ghana.¹ It examines the potential of art to offer techniques that can help us to think more ecologically. The goal is to advance a set of micropolitical tactics that extend the limits of human subjectivities into natural processes, bodies, and forces. I blend textual analysis and ethnography to explore artistically crafted texts by Deleuze and Guattari in relation to works in the visual arts, sculpture, and earthen architecture, which are also designed to tap into the perceptive dimension of ethico-political life. Through earthworks, the earth can be perceived as a co-creator of art and social life rather than a “resource” or a passive material for human action. Such arts of existence, in turn, might sensitize our bodies to these creative powers and reveal our own constitution as vital materiality and earth.

Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, the chapter argues that art produces new sets of relations that enable us to map the world beyond human space and to glimpse an image of

time, which is inhabited by multiple nonhuman worlds, sensations, and durations.²

Humanity is constantly transformed through the machines it creates, and the human body becomes a different machine every time it encounters the work of art.³ As perceivers of art we partake in the unlivable forces of the cosmos and become earth bodies by virtue of the new affects and temporal relations that form. Art enframes chaos in order to constitute new planes and extract new affects, which then gain autonomy from its creators and take on a life of their own; ecophilosophy responds to these sensory becomings by opening up new spaces for thinking and for creating concepts.

Perhaps this passage to the nonhuman can be best conceived in terms of the ways in which philosophy, art, and science work together to activate the potential of thinking to transform itself. According to Deleuze and Guattari, thinking is an activity of life, which commences only once thought confronts something other than itself. Here life may be best understood as a power to differ and create that cannot be reduced to what has been actually produced; it is also a play of intensive processes and differential relations between forces that form various beings, assemblages, and planes of perceptions and images. None of these relations is entirely determined in advance, and what is actualized refers only to a specific expression of that power's potential.⁴ Life is a flow of differences and becoming that includes the inorganic world and ceaselessly proliferates new lines of flight and ever more complex forms. As part of the flux of life thinking becomes one mode of maximization of the virtual within life, which harbors the potential to grasp prehuman forces and the differences that precede it and produce it. Whereas science seeks to isolate the properties and functions of actual bodies and states of affairs, philosophy is more interested in what a body can do or become but has not yet done or

become. To enter into philosophy, then, means to participate in the invention of a vocabulary-sensorium that maps a virtual realm of relations that a body is capable of. Ecophilosophy, in turn, may be conceived as a set of practices of thinking and sensing by way of concepts that “open lines of flight from an actual order of human bodies” and their habitual modes of perception. Ecophilosophy is an aggregate of concepts that maps the virtual possibilities of another system of “forces, energies, and flows that congeal into the more tangible materiality of animals, vegetables, minerals, wind, gravity, tides, sunlight.”⁵

One key task of ecophilosophy today is to confront anthropocentrism or all-too-human-centered ethical thinking, which lies at the root of current practices of ecological destruction. The wager of this chapter is that confronting anthropocentrism requires certain emendations of the dominant images of environmental ethics and politics. On the one hand, environmental ethics should not be limited merely to obligations, duties, and concerns among humans and what they have at stake. While rich in insights, such images of ethics involve transcendental regulations that tend to inhibit thinking’s creativity as they invoke disembodied models of thinking and ethics that are difficult to sustain in the light of contemporary scientific insights. On the other hand, we also need a correlative notion of politics that is not limited to the inquiry of political institutions, policies, and the explicit pronouncements, actions, and deliberations of human participants and bodies (i.e., macropolitics). Such a notion of politics takes into account “the body as a site of biocultural dispositions and relay point for political mobilization.”⁶ It is essential to examine anthropocentrism through a *micropolitical* lens, a dimension of politics that

attends to the myriad processes that shape our political sensibilities, dispositions, and identities.

Thus, I seek to advance an eco-ethical strategy that involves micropolitical work on the self: a kind of experiential self-artistry that helps recraft the anthropocentric feelings and attitudes that have become entrenched in the self. I examine the potential of selected artworks to offer techniques that can help us think-sense ecologically. Here, by “thinking ecologically” I mean: cultivating a sensibility to discern the profound interconnectedness of earth’s living and non-living creatures and becoming more sensitized to how human bodies are entangled with and activated by an assemblage of other bodies and forces; perceiving the coexistence of multiple durations and styles of temporality; acknowledging the presence of multiple degrees of agency and creativity, distributed along a continuum of human, earth, and other nonhuman forces; and nurturing an ability to learn to live in a world of becoming and transformation.⁷ To think ecologically is not just to think through certain abstracted and mythic fictions but also to perceive and relate to other bodies more horizontally and sympathetically. I seek to show how each bodily encounter with the artworks identified in this chapter helps render thinking political in this new practical and ecological sense.

Art can work against the tendencies of the brain to create habitual connections and to synthesize experiences into the human point of view; it takes these tendencies as its object and has the *power to* disrupt and rework operational images of the human as a habitual mode of perception and being. Confronted with the insufficiency of narratives and logical argument, art taps into an affective dimension of political life that cannot easily be subsumed under the rubric of representation or articulated in discourse. It works

upon us and our powers to articulate more than it is a mode of articulation. Art offers an indirect mode of political efficacy that has the capacity to produce potent political effects. The experience of modern art, in particular, is directly accessible to larger audiences due to its limited dependency on conceptual pre-knowledge. Art also reveals something about the constitution of time that may otherwise remain imperceptible during the busyness of everyday life; it highlights our inability to know for sure everything we can do or become. In other words, art functions as a mode of bodily intensification whose power lies not first and foremost in the meanings it solicits but in the sensations it elicits and intensifies. Encounters with the paintings of Bacon, the installations of Smithson and Serra, and African earthen architecture can be seen as a set of *practices of eco-sensation* that enable our bodies—always acting conjointly with other bodies—to transform themselves and to evolve through altered perception toward new ecological directions. The aesthetic experience of each of these works is itself less human-centered; it triggers sensory intensifications and side perceptions that subvert the anthropocentric regime of stabilized images with recomposed relations produced by the artworks themselves. Such moments of discontinuity and disruption of the order of perception are profoundly political. They modify the human-bound “partition of the sensible” and open up spaces for participation of the nonhuman in the activities of representation by rendering perceptible what had been previously imperceptible.⁸ The aesthetic experience of the work of art becomes a political act that enables the nonhuman to advene upon us and to invite further reflection on and attention to the need to recraft and enrich the internal landscape of our selves.

Part I articulates this notion of art as a mode of bodily intensification. I turn to Elizabeth Grosz, who encourages us to consider art's profound animal lineage and its rootedness in the storage of earthly excess. These animal roots ensure that the possibility of art production and opening up to nonhuman sensations and forces is not confined to the human alone. Art is charged with the creation of new worlds to come and new bodies of people, animals, plants, and things to experience them.

In Part II, I provide concrete examples. I examine works by Francis Bacon, Robert Smithson, and Richard Serra in order to experiment with new philosophical concepts that express the life of nonhuman time and sensation. First, I explore the ways in which Bacon's paintings function as machines that produce eco-sensations and experiences. Rather than reproducing or inventing forms, his paintings break with figurative references and narratives and produce sensations that more or less directly impact the nervous system. They capture and make visible something of the action of invisible forces (time, nonorganic life, speed, flight, rhythm, isolation, deformation, and dissipation) on the body: not exactly by making the invisible visible, but by rendering its effects more vivid. Bacon's practice of sensation takes us close to the "body without organs" (BwO) that lies behind and within the organism, the intensities and forces that drive the becoming-otherwise of the body. His canvases constitute zones of indiscernibility between man and animal, organic and nonorganic life. They draw us toward nonhuman becomings: becoming-animal, becoming-another, becoming-flesh. Next, I show how Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* not only captures the effects of some of the forces rendered sensible by Bacon but also allows us to cultivate presumptive generosity towards styles of temporality not immediately present to us. Smithson's

mobilization of multiple intersecting tiers of duration (some of which are human, and others not) heightens sensitivity to cycles of ecological degradation and regeneration of ecosystems' life. Third, as a corollary to Smithson's discussion, I explore how the works of Richard Serra register or translate into terms that humans can perceive the affectivity of nonhumans. Serra draws attention to the capacity of mundane man-made entities to exceed their status as objects, to produce various effects in human and other bodies, and to possess a form of agency that is marked by its own histories and trajectories.

Collectively, the thing-power of Serra's and Smithson's installations enables us to amend and stretch received notions of human agency. The act of human creativity thus becomes just one of many modes of the distributive agency of human-nonhuman assemblages.⁹

However, works such as Bacon's *Painting*, Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, and Serra's *Snake* tend to be detached from everyday life in the sense that they are associated with a notion of "art" as an autonomous sphere of socio-cultural life that requires a special visit to a museum, gallery, or installation site. This is why in the last section I turn to African earthen architecture, which intertwines earthly processes with the everyday lifecycles of people and household economies. The central question of the section, then, is how abstract categories of political theory speak to artistic practices that cannot be readily identified as "art" and as such remain invisible within theory's dominant Euro-American orientation. Does this orientation obscure existing practices of eco-sensation and important resources for contemporary environmentalism? I complement textual analysis with ethnographic methods in order to render visible within the orbit of political theory a long tradition of earthen architecture in Africa. African practices of earth-building, repair, and maintenance link the question of the ecological efficacy of earthworks to everyday

life. These practices might provide insights into the contemporary debate about sustainability and its central question of what is to be sustained. By placing into conversation the notion of art as intensification of bodily sensation advanced by Deleuze and Guattari with the everyday arts of the Gurensi people of Ghana, the section aims to resist the tendency of political theory to defer too readily to philosophers. My immersion in the everyday life of Gurensi houses as living bodies and earthen “crystals of time” could also enrich analyses of interdependencies between human subjectivity and earthly forces. The act of sharing such ethnographic observations becomes a political act. It highlights the potential of everyday arts to modify human-centered habits of perception, producing opportunities to alter earth-destroying tendencies of consumption.

In the conclusion, I tease out some ecophilosophical and political implications of an enhanced perception of multiple force-fields, degrees of agency, and tiers of nonhuman time. I emphasize the need to move back and forth between such practices, which are informed by a philosophy of immanent naturalism, and creative experimentation with familiar images of ecophilosophical thought such as those inspired by Kantian philosophy. I enlist the aid of Estonian biologist Uexküll whose concept of “Umwelten” elucidates how the world appears to each organism according to its own perceptions. From the viewpoint of these “subjective universes,” Uexküll may teach us how to intuit the degree to which we belong to others’ durations and how to learn to dwell respectfully in them. The cultivation of such receptivity reinforces the art practice of eco-sensation and ensures that during our next visit to the museum or an adobe compound earthworks may have their greatest pro-ecological effect.

ART IS OF THE ANIMAL: SEX, EXCESS, AND ARTISTIC BODIES

Art is of the animal. According to Elizabeth Grosz, art is a consequence of the excess and the experiments in intensification that have characterized sexual selection on earth. Art is an affective assemblage that exceeds representation, transforms bodily organs, and creates new rhythms via a sensory overload of images, song, dance, and color. Art is not a window into the natural and social worlds. Rather than being a celebrated instance of the evolution of human ingenuity, art is grounded in the superfluosity of nature and its power to render the sensory abundant.¹⁰

Every morning the *Scenopoetes dentiostrius*, a bird of the Australian rain forests, cuts leaves, makes them fall to the ground, and turns them over so that the paler, internal side contrasts with the earth. In this way it constructs a stage for itself like a ready-made; and directly above, on a creeper or a branch, while fluffing out the feathers beneath its beak to reveal their yellow roots, it sings a complex song made up from its own notes and, at intervals, those of other birds it imitates: it is a complete artist. This is not synesthesia in the flesh but blocs of sensations in the territory – colors, postures, and sounds that sketch out a total work of art.¹¹

The bird's courtship and dance take evolutionary developments beyond mere survival into creative expression. Such excessive detours of sexual selection render visible a common imperative shared by art and nature: useless production for the sake of production itself, for the sake of profusion and differentiation.¹² Grosz bases her reflections on Darwin's distinction between natural and sexual selection. She argues that art and music emerged primarily through sexual selection and that if they have survived it is precisely because they serve the purposes of intensification and pleasure: "Art is connected to sexual energies and impulses, to a common impulse for more."¹³ Grosz's hedonistic conception of art allows us to abandon the anthropocentric bias of the human as the sole producer and perceiver of art. The courtship dance of the bird of paradise, the

theatrical struggle of the ruffed grouse, and the spectacular coloring of deep ocean fish are three examples of the body as a spectacle (“a performance of the body at its most splendid and appealing”) and the ubiquitous production of art in nature.¹⁴ Art comes from the excess of the body’s productive capacities; art is that which exceeds need and cannot be directly defined through the useful. Even though at times Grosz implies that animals are artistic (musical) but do not produce art (music), I prefer to read her as saying that many bodies have the capacity to perform art and possess the impulse to intensify experience. For instance, new human rituals and practices may emerge from such willingness to grant birds the capacity to produce music. Rather than going to hear a symphony or see an opera, next time the lover of music may venture into the Redwood National Forest to attend a performance by the Golden-crowned Kinglet or the Stellar’s Jay.

How does art link the unlivable forces of the cosmos to the forces of “artistic” bodies through which sexual selection operates? How does the artwork form a plane of composition so that the material can become expressive and pass into sensation? According to Deleuze and Guattari, art and nature form their own circuits of indiscernibility (“we no longer know what is art and what nature”) where life transforms itself and through which all becomings pass.¹⁵ All art isolates percepts and affects, wrested from the perceptions and affections through which our bodies are organized. The two aspects of sensation, affects and percepts, constitute two nonhuman forces that the human must tap to summon up the unlivable forces of the cosmos in the aid of self-transformation. Matter must be lived not as it already is for us but in its capacity to communicate new sensations to us: “Art is where intensity is most at home, where matter

is most attenuated without being nullified: perhaps we can understand matter in art as matter at its most dilated...and where becoming is most directly in force.”¹⁶ Only then do we sense how it also exceeds our capacities. Matter becomes expressive once it is liberated from its extension through our regularized experience and has released its virtual potential. Each artist works with a given material made up of energetic traits and singularities and recomposes its incongruent elements in such ways that the work of art can capture these singularities. Art enables us to perceive the world as the effect of the forces of the earth and the forces of vibrant materiality that we cannot live; it offers us the possibility of touching and glimpsing into that which is there to be felt and perceived.¹⁷ Affects cross the threshold between the human and nonhuman, forming virtual conditions of possibility for the former to transcend itself:

Affects are precisely these nonhuman becomings of man, just as percepts – including the town – are nonhuman landscapes of nature. Not a “minute of the world passes,” says Cezanne, that we will preserve if we do not “become that minute.” We are not in the world, we become with the world; we become by contemplating it. Everything is vision, becoming. We become universes. Becoming animal, plant, molecular, becoming zero.¹⁸

Affects are man’s becoming-another, becoming-nonhuman. Affects are passages from the sensibility of being to modalities of sensation. Man turns himself into an artwork and by means of this self-transformation becomes a compound being of sensations, which are not merely to be read or interpreted but intensified into different sensations.¹⁹ For Deleuze and Guattari, sensation is a form of excitation that preserves and contracts the vibrations that compose it so that these materials can become expressive and generate cerebral movements and corporeal effects.²⁰ This is how art transforms past possibilities and materials into new qualities and resources for the future. Sensation, as a monument of vibrations (colors, forms, planes, and voids), forms a plane between chaos and the

potential of the body to become otherwise. It is an “incorporeal threshold of emergence, an unpredictable and uncontainable overspilling of forces that exist hitherto only beyond and before the plane of composition, on its other side, that of chaos.”²¹ It attunes the body to the resonance of the universe as these contracted vibratory waves heighten the receptivity of the body to respond to the unknowable forces of becoming-other of the cosmos.²²

BODY, PAINTING, AND SENSATION: BECOMING-ANIMAL, BECOMING-MEAT, BECOMING-INTENSE...

For many art lovers, Francis Bacon’s complex experiments with pictorial space are indisputably brilliant. His brilliance lies in the strange engagements his paintings demand of us, so that, as he declared, the “paint comes across directly onto the nervous system.”²³ Yet, this engagement can be too spine chilling and uncanny to embrace fully, for his works are filled with contorted bodies, crucifixions, screams of horror, monsters, coupled beastly figures, and running flesh. Positive sympathies with nature are unlikely to emerge from the encounter between the body and his canvases, saturated as they are with the violence of such spectacles. But there is still something about the way he “paints sensations” that may activate circuits of geoaffects that draw us into nonhuman becomings. What if his paintings function as “bodies without organs” that enable us too to partake more poignantly in the vitality of our own germinality? Is it possible that these paintings harness a plurality of invisible forces and zones of indetermination between man and animal, between organic and nonorganic life?

My goal is to extract a set of ecophilosophical concepts from the sensible aggregates produced by Bacon's paintings, to present Bacon as a colorist of becomings who captures on canvas the affective encounters of bodies with nonhuman forces that are not immediately perceptible to us. According to Deleuze, all art has a rhythmic variation. The coexistent systolic and diastolic movements of rhythm that traverse Bacon's paintings are composed through the interaction of three pictorial elements that, in Deleuze's view, are key to the reception of his works: the Figure, the contour, and the color field (as a material structure). The Figure refers to a recumbent, coupled over, or seated human body that is frequently isolated inside a contour by being placed on a bed, on a chair, or in a ring, a circle, a cube, or a parallelepiped. The body is thus subjected to a plurality of forces that deform and contort it: the lust of copulation; the drowsy advance of sleep; the urge to vomit, defecate, cry, or scream; the violence of a hiccup.²⁴ It is here that the contour changes as "it turns into the half-sphere of the washbasin or umbrella, the thickness of the mirror, acting as a deformer; the Figure is contracted or dilated in order to pass through a hole or into the mirror." The contour acts like a membrane, a threshold that assures the double exchange and communication between the Figure and the color field (material structure): "The Figure is not simply the isolated body, but also the deformed body that escapes from itself...the body must return to the material structure and dissipate into it, thereby passing through or into these prostheses-instruments, which constitute passages and states that are real, physical, and effective, and which are sensations and not imaginings."²⁵ Each of Bacon's Figures sustains a precise sensation as the agent of bodily deformations and propels this sensation into the nervous system.

Every Figure is already a “coagulated sensation” and implicates within itself an intensive composition of differential relations.²⁶

According to Deleuze, the most elementary form of sensation created by Bacon’s paintings is *vibration*, which is formed by the fundamental rhythms of systolic compression of the color field and diastolic deformation of the Figure. Even this most elementary form is composite: its vibration is attained through a complex experimentation with color. Color “is discovered as the differential relation upon which everything else depends,” an “invisible pulsation that is more nervous than cerebral”; vibration refers to pure, i.e., non-subjective, relations between colors.²⁷ Hence flows of polychromatic colors commonly dominated by blue and red, the colors of meat, tend to compose the flesh of Bacon’s Figures and provide him with the simplest formula of “coloring sensation.” (*Figure at a Washbasin* 1976) Yet, rather than simply isolated and deformed figures, Bacon often paints coupled or entangled bodies that are sleeping, copulating, or interacting as they enter into complex patterns of *resonance*. Resonance is the form of sensation that puts together multiple sensations and vibrations to produce a new Figure or composite body. The pictorial encounter of Bacon’s bodies leads to the formation of a dissonant duet, a new ontological unit, that exceeds its constitutive elements and affirms the force of time as becoming (center panel of *Triptych* 1970). With the triptych, the vibrations and patterns of resonance are drawn into a *forced movement* towards distention and disengagement from the specific figures and bodies. Rhythm acquires an autonomous being and “becomes Figure, according to its own separated directions, the active, the passive, and the attendant.”²⁸ As the figures are set apart by the background fields of bright, raw color of the three panels, the intensive force of rhythm

becomes the Figure itself. This rhythmic Figure is composed through the interplay of the active local rhythms of ascent and amplification, passive rhythms of descent and elimination, and “attendant” rhythms that remain constant as the measure of the variations of intensity of the other two.²⁹ Thus the order of sensation of the triptych consists in the distribution of these three fundamental rhythms. Its panels are brought into relation by the separating and unifying forces of naked light and uniform color that form a luminous plane within which “the Figures look like trapeze artists whose milieu is no longer anything but light and color”(*Triptych, Studies of the Human Body 1970* or *Triptych 1970*).³⁰

The three modalities of sensation coexist in Bacon’s paintings, which function as machines that produce effects of vibration, resonance, and forced movement. These effects are always mixed and in variation: the vibrations of the diastole-systole that capture “forces of isolation, deformation and dissipation” enter into complex interactions with the forces of coupling, harnessed by the resonant configuration of bodies, that integrate these forces of isolation, deformation, and dissipation. Both flows enter into new compositions with the forced movement of the triptych that operates with forces of separation and division, which, in turn, integrate coupling as a phenomenon.³¹ These invisible forces of systole and diastole, color and light, bring to life the “beings of sensation” that inhabit Bacon’s paintings. They render sensible another force, the force of time: “There is the force of changing time, through the allotropic variation of bodies...which involves deformation; and then there is the force of eternal time, the eternity of time, through the uniting-separating that reigns in the triptychs, a pure light.”³² Thus, Bacon’s paintings can be seen as affective assemblages of forces that express the

intersecting durational rhythms of eternal time and time as becoming with the intensive forces that traverse and compose bodies and affect their interactions with other bodies.

The logic of sensation that Deleuze finds in Bacon is not that of the lived body but of the “body without organs.” The “lived body” is too assimilated to its intersubjective context to suffice for Deleuze or Bacon. The viewer is implicated in this logic qua the “body without organs.” Bacon’s canvas becomes a destructured multiplicity of bodies, forces, and intensities revealing an affective dimension of becoming, in which the organizing distinctions between man and animal, body and world, are troubled and only vectors of matter-energy and circuits of geo-affect are sensed.³³ Bacon’s portraits abound in spasmodic deformations and bestial transformations of the human body. The recognizable traits of the human face frequently assume indeterminate shapes and mutant lines of flight. Animal traits now emerge from human forms: sometimes the face is swallowed by a bestial mouth open as wide as possible in a scream (*Study After Velázquez’s Portrait of Pope Innocent X or Head VI*); sometimes the human head is replaced by a quivering bird of prey whose wingspan spirals down the scrubbed area (*Triptych 1976*); sometimes a man’s shadow gains a bat-shaped existence (*Triptych May-June 1973*). Many of these themes of animalization of the Figure are brought together in *Painting (1946)*, which presents a seated man in a dark formal suit under a half-spherical umbrella in a butcher shop. The cow carcasses suspended in a cruciform behind him bring to light the reality of meat as crucified victim: “Of course, we are meat, we are potential carcasses. If I go into a butcher shop I always think it’s surprising that I wasn’t there instead of the animal.”³⁴ All that can be seen of the man’s head is its lower jaw, thick lower lip, and the raw flesh exposed by the removal of its upper lip. The toothy

grimace of the facial fragment threatens to swallow it at the same time as the Figure uses the diastolic pull of the umbrella as a nozzle through which the rest of the body wants to pass. The body becomes animal, flesh or meat. Here meat acquires the colors of live flesh:

Bacon thus pursues a very peculiar project as a portrait painter: *to dismantle the face to rediscover the head or make it emerge from beneath the face*. The deformations which the body undergoes are also the *animal traits* of the head. This has nothing to do with a correspondence between animal forms and facial forms...In place of formal correspondences, what Bacon's painting constitutes is a *zone of indiscernibility or undecidability* between man and animal. Man becomes animal...It is never a combination of forms, but rather the common fact: the common fact of man and animal. Bacon pushes his to the point where even his most isolated Figure is already a coupled Figure; man is coupled with his animal in a latent bullfight. This objective zone of indiscernibility is the entire body, but the body insofar as it is flesh or meat. Of course, the body has bones as well, but bones are only its spatial structure. A distinction is often made between flesh and bone, and even between things related to them. The body is revealed only when it ceases to be supported by the bones, when the flesh ceases to cover the bones, when the two exist for each other, but each on its own terms: the bone as the material structure of the body, the flesh as the bodily material of the Figure.³⁵



Painting, 1946.

In *Painting* (1946) what achieves this pictorial tension between flesh and bone is meat, the common fact of man and animal that assumes the incipient traits of the head. “Every man who suffers is a piece of meat...a beast, the beast that suffers is a man;” animals become part of humanity at the same time as humanity becomes cattle headed for the slaughterhouse.³⁶ This mutually transformative process of disorganization of the animal and “butcherization” of the human calls into question the sharpness of the divide that privileges the human over the nonhuman by inducing a passage of sensation between species boundaries. Through Bacon’s intensification of the relation between the Figure and color the agony and slaughter of a cow is retained as a zone of exchange between man and animal, in which an element of each passes into the other.

Bacon’s ability to induce becoming-animal in the bodies of his viewers depends upon his pictorial experimentation with bodies on canvas. In the process of becoming, Bacon’s bodies are defined by fleshy movements and speeds; by the active, passive, and attendant rhythms traversing the canvas; by the capacities of colors and forms to affect the conventional form of a cow or a human, to be affected by forces of systole and diastole, and to enter new figural compositions. Bacon’s Figures have multiple levels, thresholds, and modes of affectivity. One hardly knows what composes the Figures or their capacities. Faces turn bestial. Cheeks become chops; torsos, knots of flesh and nerve. According to Deleuze, the Figure of flesh is an intensive body of sensation, a body without organs, which “is opposed less to organs than to the organization of organs we call an organism.”³⁷ Whereas the organism refers to a specific organization of determinate organs, the body without organs, as a limit notion, is defined by the emergence and disappearance of provisional organs with indeterminate functions. These

provisional organs of sensation are formed when a wave of the non-anthropocentric element of desire meets the forces acting on the body: “When the wave encounters external forces at a particular level, a sensation appears. An organ will be determined by this encounter, but it is a provisional organ that endures only as long as the passage of the wave and the action of the force, and which will be displaced in order to be posited elsewhere.”³⁸ Every sensation involves a difference of level and what is a mouth at one level becomes an anus at another level, or at the same level upon the encounter with different set of forces. Bacon’s toothy grimace or scream that swallows the face, the bird of prey that replaces the head or nose that turns into pig’s snout (*Self-Portrait 1973*) all constitute provisional organs and loci of sensation on the body without organs.³⁹ So the body without organs is “finally defined by the *temporary and provisional presence* of determinate organs” with indeterminate functions.⁴⁰

The aesthetic experience of this indeterminacy of relations between sensory organs and the act of perception solicits a suggestive awareness of both the migratory flows of sensory feeling and the work of the brain below the level of intellectual awareness to a certain coherence of the body image under new conditions of migration. The compositional dimension of brain/body activities is modified through the infraconscious perception of a body that does not look or function exactly like a familiar human body, a perception that may draw us into the quest to become something more than we usually are.⁴¹ Thus ecophilosophy gains from engaging the *potentia* of Bacon’s paintings as they loosen the power of anthropocentrism over the body and dissolve “anthropos” into the intensive, material forces that structure it. Each time we encounter one of his canvases we may be prompted to sense how the sublime of “meat” courses

through us. Such conjunctions can produce more empathetic sociabilities. What seems to be at stake for Bacon as a painter of becoming is less a matter of the body trying to remain fluid than of forging multiple intersections between the human as conventionally composed and that which both exceeds it and occupies it. Is it possible to think of Bacon's body of work as an ecosystem, a new collective and heterogeneous body that has built-in mechanisms to transcend absorption into an all-too-anthropocentric order of representation?

Of course, one could object to the proposed reading of Bacon on several grounds: Is there no travelling through a cultural meaning-frame involved when one sees a Bacon canvas? How does one ensure that encounters with Bacon's work produce their greatest pro-ecological effects? Why would Bacon's work produce empathy and not revulsion? Don't we need a settled subject from which to absorb these experiences? All of these objections have validity, and in the conclusion of the chapter I emphasize the need to complement the arts of eco-sensation with other macropolitical experiments and arts of the self that will nurture ecological dispositions. Such complementary practices may make all the difference when it comes to which of these sensibilities prevail. However, what is of immediate concern here is that Bacon's key aim—to direct the conveyance of sensation—is linked to a new understanding of art as a form of territorialization that produces conditions of possibility for new deterritorializations. Sensation as the action of forces upon the body needs to find contained expression within a canvas-territory to have its greatest impact. The figural (i.e., the becoming of Bacon's Figures) constitutes one such territory, produced by a modulation of color that does violence to the figurative and narration. Before Bacon's figures were fully formed as familiar human shapes, he

“scrambled their proto-formations using a chance-based technique, like randomly smearing or splattering the paint.”⁴² Deleuze calls this coloring technique the *diagram*: “The diagram is thus the operative set of asignifying and nonrepresentative lines and zones, linestrokes and color-patches.”⁴³ Deleuze’s claim to direct conveyance does not mean that art does not require previous forms and clichés but rather that it operates simultaneously on several registers. Art proceeds less through the manipulation of signifying material than through accessing the plane of intensities beneath it. The invisible worlds of Bacon’s painting always emerge from within the visible: “one starts with a figurative form, a diagram intervenes and scrambles it, and a form of a completely different nature emerges from the diagram, which is called the Figure.”⁴⁴ The diagram brings chaos into the figurative in order to propel new order out of chaos.

The human in Bacon is thus understood as a habitual mode of perceiving and being (i.e., a mode of figuration or representation). The goal is not to break radically with the human but to stretch and deform it in order to release and sense invisible forces that act upon the body and constitute it as such. In the process, one becomes aware of the expressiveness of the material and a certain degree of agency of color that is not simply reducible to Bacon’s. I seek to draw attention to the *altered habit of perception that is enacted by the clash between the image of bodies viewers bring to the museum and the weird forms Bacon paints*. Bacon’s work accentuates the dim perception we sometimes have of something alien, wild, and protean within ourselves. Such disrupting experiences and waves of bodily micro-shocks are rendered more available for experience and reflection upon it. The practice of eco-sensation involves a way of seeing: it shifts the

gaze from the form of the artwork to the nature of the encounters with other bodies and the new experiences of becoming-intense it brings about.

SMITHSON'S *SPIRAL JETTY*: MAPPING THE DURATION-SENSATIONS OF THE EARTH

It took 292 truck-hours, two large dump trucks, a tractor, a front loader, and 625 man-hours to construct Robert Smithson's monumental earthwork *Spiral Jetty* (1970), located on the Great Salt Lake in Utah.⁴⁵ Using black basalt rocks and earth from the site, the artist created a coil 1,500 feet long and 15 feet wide that stretched out counter-clockwise into the translucent red water:

Basalt and earth were scooped from the beach at the beginning of the jetty: the trucks backed up to the outline of the spiral and dumped the material. The form of the work was influenced by the site, which had once been used to mine oil; the spiral shape of the jetty was derived from the local topography as well as relating to a mythic whirlpool at the centre of the lake. The spiral also reflects the circular formation of the salt crystals that coat the rocks. Smithson was initially attracted to the site because of the red colourations of the salt lake. The work was changed by its environment, reflecting Smithson's fascination with entropy, the inevitable transformative forces of nature...The work periodically re-emerges from the lake.⁴⁶

The experience of the entropic event of Smithson's earthwork seems to be governed by a Baconian practice of duration-sensation. Like Bacon's paintings, the periodically re-emerging jetty enables us to perceive the effects of nonhuman forces of time and the earth that run through life and connect the organic with the nonorganic life of materiality itself. As basalt and earth were scooped to isolate and bound the coil to the contours of the old industrial site, Smithson demarcated a territory, a frame, a growingly discernible object ("Framing is the means by which objects are delimited, qualities unleashed and art made possible"). He made visible systolic forces of isolation.⁴⁷ The systole, which

contracts the salt crystals, basalt, earth, and water into the spiral frame, defines the first movement from the lake to the jetty. But there is already a diastole that opposes the first movement. It outlines a series of deformations, flowing from the human impact of industrial development, mining, and rapid urbanization to the sediment deformation caused by Smithson's artistic intervention and the powerful lake forces that keep pressing his work to the earth. The spiral slowly uncoils into the elements that compose it and merges with chaos. Thus the second movement is the diastolic deformation that dissipates the earthwork back into the complex material system of the lake from which it was extracted. Smithson's work itself does not exist in a stable form; it is in continual transformation and variation. The jetty is the production of earth-sensations as the expression of forces of isolation, deformation, and dissipation.

The systolic and diastolic movements of rhythm harnessed by Smithson's earthwork may also be definable as the coexistence of multiple tiers of human and nonhuman durations. On the one hand, the jetty, whose spiral shape defies linear time, extracts and monumentalizes a particular set of human duration-sensations. There is the time of 625 man-hours to construct the earthwork and the time it takes for our bodies to experience it. On the other hand, these human durations are co-mobilized and enter into complex conjunctions with a range of nonhuman, inorganic temporalities. We have seen that with regard to the processes of ongoing relations that organize the site a certain form of geological duration is at play. There is the time of the day, the time of the weather, and the changing cycles of the sun and the moon, all of which are indispensable for the experience of the jetty. As the jetty is slowly merging with forces of the earth it is becoming a monument to a future in which it no longer exists. It actualizes a time of

dissipation, a diastole of time, in which the past is coextensive with the present and the future. These rhythms of temporal variation of the earthwork sometimes intersect with a solar duration made visible by its periodic re-emergences as a white salt crystal art installation, shaped by prolonged droughts in Utah.⁴⁸ Finally, by “collaborating with entropy” and “using the environmental catastrophe to compose new life,” Smithson allows us to sense the force of time as becoming, replete with the earth’s life force and its power of regeneration in a universe that is temporally open to a certain degree.⁴⁹ Thus, the *Spiral Jetty* functions as a form of geophilosophy that allows us to reflect on our temporal relation to the world. When we look at this world, this gigantic BwO, we can sense the powerful nonorganic flows of life that move across and compose the body of the earth. In so sensing, we approach earth-bodies that open up towards the unlivable and intensive forces of the earth. What is more, Smithson’s art may nurture heightened sensitivity to cycles of ecological degradation and the regeneration of ecosystems’ life in conjunction with the need to rethink the problematic of human agency. As the boundaries between nature and artifice are dissolved in the experience of the sensation-durations of nonorganic life, it becomes clear that natural and cultural processes both share agency in shaping the earthwork and are both capable of producing art and intensifying sensations. Agency and creativity are now co-articulated and distributed among a multiplicity of human and nonhuman participants: “creative change in the world sometimes arrives through inter-agental concatenations that exceed the previous reach of either party. We participate in creation, more than being masterful agents of it, partly because it surges through us as well as from us and partly because the confluences of forces from which it emerges often exceed the reach of any single party.”⁵⁰ A notion of distributive agency—

that is, a world in which human and nonhuman forces all possess *some* degree of agency—emerges from an encounter with Smithson's earthwork. This notion highlights the capacity of specific human-nonhuman configurations or assemblages to produce effects that cannot be traced back entirely either to the will of human micro-agents or to the affective power of their nonhuman co-participants.

THE MATTER OF TIME: RHIZOMATIC ENCOUNTERS WITH VITAL MATERIALITY

Over the past forty years the site-specific sculptures of Richard Serra have emerged as some of the most successful attempts to register the affectivity and vitality of materiality, by which I mean the power of material assemblages to express vitalities in ways that become available to us. Serra, a former steelworker, creates sculptures of lead and steel of such vast proportions that they may take up entire warehouses. In 1969, Serra created *One-Ton Prop (House of Cards)*, a simple cube composed of four rough lead slabs propped precariously against each other by their own weight like a flimsy house of cards. Ever since, Serra's works have enabled us to move beyond our habitual space-time coordinates. Serra's monumental installation *The Matter of Time* in the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao deserves special attention. The eight sculptures are made of gigantic plates of towering weatherproof steel, bent and curved, leaning in and out, which carve very private spaces that allow one to walk into, through, and around each individual piece as well as into and through the space engendered by the installation as a whole.⁵¹ The scale, scope, height, and weight of the installation are all of unprecedented proportions:

The lightest piece weighs 44 tons and the heaviest is 276 tons. They are all more than 4 meters high. Despite their tremendous weight and size, the plates that form

the sculptures are not fixed to the floor, but are rather in balance... In these and most of his pieces, Richard Serra has used weathering steel, a type of steel used in the construction of bridges and buildings. When left outdoors its color slowly changes from gray to orange, and after seven or eight years transforms to dark brown. After ten years, all the pieces have a homogeneous, smooth and continuous surface.⁵²

This temporal variation of color is one manifestation of the uncanny capacity of Serra's torqued ellipses, spirals, and toruses to shift from their status as mere objects to formations that produce tangible transformations. They situate us in a unique material environment in which weight becomes light and airy as the enormous mass of the steel plates is converted into floating pieces by virtue of being folded in certain ways. The formal linkage of all the works in the installation encourages the viewer to become sensitive to the forces of thing-power emanating from the sculptural field as a self-sustaining ecosystem of steel: "The sculptures are not objects in space... They impart form to the entire space; they shape the space through axes, trajectories, and passages between their solids and voids...Diverse equilibriums coexist. Simultaneity matters, not hierarchies."⁵³ The eight sculptures collectively generate a conversation as each visitor finds herself inevitably drawn into them. In fact, the installation is organized in such a way that upon entering the room the viewer simultaneously enters the sculptural space. There are multiple entrances and exits. There is no single path to follow or predetermined succession of views. Without knowing where he or she is going, each viewer is encouraged to explore different voids and passages. Thus *The Matter of Time* enables a rhizomatic encounter with vital materiality that is intensified by the rhythm of each viewer's movement. Each time someone walks inside the corridor formed by the two *Torqued Ellipses*, separated from one another by a gap of two meters, "the walls sometimes tilt towards the inside or the outside, bulging and then receding. The steel

plates fold until they reach an extreme tension and they form a skin that wraps the elliptical space. This is a shape that didn't exist previously, neither in architecture or sculpture. This innovative shape makes steel look like an extremely flexible and dynamic material.”⁵⁴

The *Torqued Ellipses* and the *Spirals* are both entangled in continuous movement and absorb the viewer in their movement. The movement is produced by a spin over on their own axis, which makes each torqued shape turn upwards from its base without changing its radius.⁵⁵ Each time one's body moves, the spirals and ellipses move too. According to Serra, “you get involved with what effect the work has physically on your body as you walk. So, time and movement became really crucial to how I deal with what I deal with, not only sight and boundary, but how one walks through a piece and what one feels and registers in terms of one's own body in relation to another body.”⁵⁶ Serra's plates move in such a way that they produce powerful effects and sensations that, in turn, inspire the viewer's body to seek new encounters and make adjustments for the alterations it suffers. The often claustrophobic and sometimes threatening sensations of precarious balance and imminent threat pass into feelings of release upon exiting the passage. The dizzyingly fragmented physical and visual experiences of dislocation flow into and modify the direct, interactive experiences with the coherent language of the sculptures. These are movements of territorialization and deterritorialization, animated by the series of encounters between the affective bodies of the viewer and the material structure. There is an unlimited range of individual experiences, but they all heighten our awareness of the vitality of matter and the conative capacity of bodies to affect and be affected.



The Matter of Time, 2005. Installation of seven sculptures, weatherproof steel. Guggenheim Bilbao Museum © 2014 Richard Serra/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

One also becomes aware of the multiple linkages between this vitalist logic of the installation and a multi-layered quality of temporality. The duration of the experience of the largest ellipse is different in kind from the temporal experience of walking into and through the *Snake*. There is also the time of precarious balance that involves “the fragments of the physical and visual memory that remain to re–combine.”⁵⁷ As these memories melt back into perception, one begins to discern a new image of time that comprises a diversity of durations:

The perceptual or aesthetic, emotional, or psychological time of the sculptural experience is quite different from real time. It is nonnarrative, discontinuous, fragmented, decentered, disorienting. The perceptual fragmentation, the multiplicity of views, the discontinuity in the process of viewing contribute to the fact that neither the installation nor the singular form in it can be reduced to one retainable image.⁵⁸

Serra's art not only constitutes a radical break with figurative references and cultivates attentiveness to the vitality of matter, but also produces a set of unique duration-sensations that can be activated only through our bodily encounters with this vitality. His art aims to create new relationships by giving new life to old industrial materials in a creative act that shuts the door on practical utility and diminishes instrumentality. We begin to nurture presumptive generosity to other styles of temporalities and to experience the relationship between people-materialities and thing-materialities in a more rhizomatic way. I see Serra's art as a step towards a more ecological sensibility, but we have to keep in mind that no two people share the same walk through the torqued ellipses. And the question remains: If Serra successfully alerts us to thing-power, does registering the effects of thing-power always remain solely a human act?

ARCHITECTURES OF BECOMING: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF AN AFRICAN COMPOUND

The placement of Smithson's and Serra's artworks away from everyday life--in an installation site or a museum where they can be appreciated for their value as aesthetic objects—reveals a limit to the political and ecological effectiveness of such artworks. In the words of Deleuze, “the people are missing.”⁵⁹ This is why I turn next to African earthen architecture, which offers a window into the interdependencies between earthly processes and the everyday lifecycles of large groups of people. Can the duration-sensations enabled by Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* be experienced once the rocks and the earth re-emerge as houses in a Gurensi village, and not merely “land art” in the deserted waters of the Great Salt Lake? Would the sensations generated by African earth building

and maintenance approximate the awareness of the vitality of matter heightened by Serra's torqued ellipses? How do the lifecycles of earthen houses interact with the lifecycles of their inhabitants? Do such interactions generate a bodily understanding of the earthwork as an actant? I blend ethnography and political theory to address these questions. I suggest that it is both the experience of living in an earthen house and belonging to the community that built it that are responsible for inducing earth-bound sensibilities. African practices of earth building, repair, and maintenance merge art with the social and the ecological. They suspend clear-cut demarcations between art and non-art, between human and nonhuman, between life and matter.

Until very recently the existence of an African architecture—with the notable exception of Egypt—was not considered worthy of recognition in the Western art world. This refusal reflects a generally prevalent attitude that monumentality and permanence are prerequisites to architectural definition. When the Europeans didn't encounter familiar monumental structures that could endure in time and space, they presumed that architecture as such did not exist. According to Labelle Prussin, this image of African architecture was reinforced by the museum-piece-collecting, archaeological mania that accompanied increasing rates of African colonization: "In an architecture composed primarily of vegetal or earthen materials, as was the case in Africa, only wooden elements were removable: carved wooden columns, plaques in wood or metal, decorative roof pinnacles, doors, doorposts, doorframes, and locks, all architectural components, were removed from their contextual surroundings and reclassified as sculpture."⁶⁰ It was more fitting to reclassify African architecture as museum-bound sculpture than to admit the existence of vernacular architectures of "non-permanence" shaped by earthen

processes of renewal that mark specific localities of ancestral dwelling.⁶¹ Permanence as a traditional canon of architectural quality is troubled by the dynamic rhythms and lifecycles of earthen houses: their embeddedness in an ever-shifting web of socio-ecological relations exposes them as living bodies that originate, become social, and then grow old and wither away.⁶²

Ethnography enables us to highlight such vernacular architectures of becoming that remain largely invisible within Euro-American orientations. My immersion in the earthen compounds (*yea*) of the Gurensi people of Ghana provides one such example. The *yire* is a physical structure sculpted out of earth and water, weaving a “rhizome” of rooms, walls, ancestral shrines, open spaces, and courtyards. In Gurene, the term *yire* refers to: 1) house, dwelling, building; and 2) household or family, either nuclear or extended.⁶³ The architecture of each Gurensi compound may thus be viewed as a sociogram and embodiment of the family that builds and inhabits it. Internal family changes are almost immediately translated into physical reorganizations of the house: “there is no building that is just standing without people... There is a lot of extension. They usually start with a small house, then when the children grow up, others also have other children and they begin to extend the house.”⁶⁴ A compound without occupants is considered “lifeless” and will be eventually abandoned to “crumble back to the earth.”⁶⁵ Nonpermanent building materials are particularly well suited to accommodate the changing relationships of the domestic cycle of family life.

The building process is a long and cooperative effort by the living, the ancestors, and the earth. The construction of a new compound involves not only the immediate house occupants but the whole extended family as well as the community at large:

“Everyone is involved. The community then comes, whoever hears that this man is putting up a building. They all come around to help, to support.”⁶⁶ Water is brought by the women; the mortar is made by the men. Although they seem to be fragile compositions of soil, water, straw, and dung, orchestrated by communal labor, these architectures have endured for centuries. Heavy rains and strong winds regularly destroy parts of the rooms and the roofs or crack the compounds’ walls. They have to be renewed and resurfaced periodically, nurturing a continuity of social participation and cultural sustainability.⁶⁷



Construction of a room in an earthen compound

The building material is the earth itself, in which the ancestors reside and from which the ancestors came: “The intimacy with and dependence upon the Earth...are expressed in the way each compound seems to rise out of the ground, as if it were simply a vertical extension of the Earth itself.”⁶⁸ The vertical axis connects the domain of the life-generating earth (*tiŋa*) below and the “fecundator” sky (*wine*) above. The earth (*tiŋa*)

is the abode of the ancestors, whose blessings have to be secured before plans for new construction can proceed. In some areas of the Upper East Region the *tindaana* (earth custodian) has to “cut the sod and clear the area,” i.e., uproot some grass with a hoe “so that the land will also know,” before house building starts.⁶⁹ In the Bongo area, for instance, the *denya’ana*, the flat-roofed female room that serves as a mortuary of the landlord, is always the first room to be built. Once it is completed, the building process has to be postponed for a day so that the house builder can consult the soothsayer and inform the ancestors about his plans to resettle: “before you start any traditional home, first of all you have to survey the place, go in the night, midnight, sit there, if the weather is very cold it means that it is a good place, if the weather is very hot, it means that there are evil spirits in the place.”⁷⁰ The earthen locality has to agree to accept her new dweller and establish affective bonds with his extended family. Each new compound is a complex negotiation of new and existing relationships between humans and the earth. It is an environmental assemblage formed by conjoint geo-affects and compounds of sensations.

The next day, the building process resumes and the foundation for the *zɔŋo* (the animal room) is built. This is the only room that requires the performance of a rite: the builders put stalks of millet and excrements of fowls in the room, representing the pivotal household activities of farming and animal rearing. The rite constitutes a plea for good harvest yields and for protection of the house animals. The *zɔŋo* is also a key zone of transition and change: when the head of the house dies, his clothes are placed on its thatched roof. If his wife dies, the widower has to spend a night in the *zɔŋo*. The animal room mediates the interplay between life and death; it connects the compound to seasonal cycles of fertility and renewal of the earth.

After the construction of the *zɔŋo*, the builders proceed with the rest of the compound. Behind the main entrance is the cattle kraal (*nagedene*). Big cylindrical granaries (*baare*) where the household's produce is stored are scattered around the kraal. Little distinguishes the rooms "where the animals stay" from those that house human occupants. According to Prussin, this is an architectural testimony "to the care, protection, and value accorded to livestock."⁷¹ Animal rearing, a group of house builders once explained to me, shapes the marked regularity of spacing between neighboring compounds, ensuring sufficient distances "so that animals can roam."⁷²



The house of a Gurensi chief. On the right side of the entrance are the ancestral shrines.

The front yard (*zanyɔre*) is the public space and reception area of each compound.⁷³ The head of the household sits there under a shed or an old ancestral tree, and is joined by other elders, playing children, and elderly women who greet visitors and keep an eye on everyone who enters or leaves the house. The front yard is also guarded

by the ancestors. It contains the ancestral shrines, circular or conical earthen platforms that are usually located just outside the entrance. The earthen mound itself constitutes the abode of the ancestral spirit and it often includes a hole that allows the spirit to pass in and out; the actual shrine is either a stone or a bangle (such as a bracelet or a ring) placed on the mound's top and covered by pot shards or pieces of calabash.⁷⁴ A descendant is expected to feed and pay respect to his deceased father, grandfather, or grandmother through regular libation and sacrifice. Death does not end one's belonging to the compound. The deceased play an active role in the life of the house, ensuring abundant harvests, children, and protection from illnesses and droughts.

The earthen compound is a monument to duration: it simultaneously accommodates the house's dead occupants and embodies the forces of time as transformation and becoming over which the living have only limited control. Time is no longer determined by linear movement: it is what Deleuze calls "out of joint."⁷⁵ The compound forms a Deleuzian time-crystal, in which the past is contemporaneous with the present: "Time has to split at the same time as it sets itself out or unrolls itself: it splits in two dissymmetrical jets, one of which makes all the present pass on, while the other preserves all the past. Time consists of this split, and it is this, it is time, that *we see in the crystal*...We see in the crystal the perpetual foundation of time, non-chronological time, Chronos and not Chronos."⁷⁶ Time is exposed to be a multiplicity. It inscribes the body of the house with the marks of successive deaths and deliveries, punctuating transitions between multiple generations and the vitality of the compound itself. Together, the mortuary of the founding ancestors, the ancestral shrines by the entrance, the umbilical cords of all the children implanted into the foundation of the granary, the

personal items of the deceased head of the house on the rooftop of the *zɔŋo*, and the pots of the women who once occupied the rooms allow us to sense a fork of time, a parting of durations.⁷⁷ This is a form of intuition that moves us beyond the actual into the realm of the virtual and opens up perception to virtual dimensions of time that are not so easily perceptible.⁷⁸

We can now discern a *subaltern* time-crystal, which forges a dialogue between two concurrent presents, one traditional and one modern.⁷⁹ In chapter 5 I will discuss earthen architecture as a “minor” art form in Northern Ghana. Today the round rooms considered typical in some regions of Northern Ghana are slowly being supplanted by rectangular rooms, exposing the influence of the urban areas in the rapidly modernizing south where many young people migrate in search of employment. Zinc continues to replace grass for roofing; cement has become a common addition to the mortar mix of soil, water, straw, and dung. One can see earthen walls of compounds covered by cell phone numbers or Vodafone advertisements, thatched roofs secured with car tires, and earthen shrines sheltered by aluminum sheets.

Lastly, African earthen architecture can be understood not only as a time-crystal but also as an affective assemblage that enables us to meditate on the notion of human agency. It draws attention to the agency that the house-builders shared with the agency of the forces of time, Harmattan winds, erosion, and the artistry of the rainy and dry seasons that remold the house each year in concert. The Gurensi compound allows us to reflect on some of the ideas of distributive agency and multiple actants involved in the process of art production articulated also by Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*. However, African architecture offers insight into a notion of distributive agency that is more personified than

Smithson's. Smithson's vast geological scale of sensory production always involves an acute durational awareness of multiple modes and degrees of agency, many of which flow from powerful impersonal forces and processes. The gigantic BwO of the jetty breaks up some of the tendencies toward organic harmony of the living bodies of African compounds. In contrast, the sensory immersion within the lifecycles of earthen compounds intertwines "nature's" agencies with the agencies of specific ancestors, families, and clan genealogies. It heightens perspectivism and animism, which I explored in chapter 3 as existential dispositions that may open doors of perception to worlds gathered within a web of personalized relationships between humans and nonhumans. In such worlds no single perspective exhausts the abundance of reality. Perspectivism is expressed in the architectural design of ancestral shrines, in the rites performed in the *zɔŋo*, and in the compound's distance from neighboring compounds. Unlike Smithson's jetty, which enables us to register the affectivity of powerful nonorganic forces and durations of the earth, the compound is a sensory condensation of a plurality of perspectives and agencies that reveal *tiŋa* as a simultaneously social, natural, and personal force. Together the jetty and the house prompt us to perceive earthworks not as objects or commodities but as a web of relationships between humans, other beings, and the earth. These relationships are mutually transformative relations of interdependence.

EMBARKING ON JOURNEYS TO *UMWELTEN* OTHER THAN OUR OWN

The practice of eco-sensation reveals not only that each human lifeworld—African or Western—has a specific duration, but also that there are also coexisting

nonhuman durations, inferior and superior to us. Rather than locating all other durations within our own (e.g., the ancestral tree, swarm of cicadas, or the granite rock perceived as extended objects within our world), this practice enables us to tap into an open virtual whole of multiple durations (the ancestral tree, swarm of cicadas, and the granite rock as processes that sense different vibrations, resonances, and waves of light, heat, and moisture that form other worlds). According to Claire Colebrook, the thought of different durations can have profound implications for politics. Just like the example of the neglected ecological potentials of African earthen architecture, Colebrook turns to aboriginal politics in Australia to prompt us to re-experience other ways of life not as earlier or more “primitive” versions of our own but as different styles of temporality or duration.⁸⁰ For instance, land disputes between Australian Aborigines and the government can be understood as disputes about durations. For the former, identity is constituted through a spiritual affiliation with a sacred earth and history. It is not a history of documents or legal archive but a “dreaming” or body of myths concerning human and animal bodies: “on the one hand, a time and a people whose memory is given through a virtually present collective memory and land, and on the other hand a time of European culture measured by a ‘man’ who remains the same regardless of locale and for whom land and culture are external items of property...philosophy only begins to think when it encounters these other durations.”⁸¹ Here Aboriginal “dreaming” resonates with African oral histories of the relationship between people and the land. We will see in chapter 5 that the contemporary contestations over political authority and agency in Northern Ghana also entail a series of disputes over competing human and nonhuman durations. Thus a more acute awareness of the enfolded nature of time allows us to confront a

European periodization of world history and political development, linked to notions of linear progress, evolution of universal reason, etc., that has historically served to rationalize practices such as colonization, conquest, and neoliberal development. Now we can begin to acknowledge the coexistence of multiple modernities and temporalities that enable us to recognize the Other (human or nonhuman) as the Other without subsuming it into the order of the Same or the Human.

In this respect, we also become better equipped to apprehend how our manipulation of the environment brings us up against other unfoldings of time, fluctuations and mutations that alter the speeds of nonhuman durations within our lifetime. Recent examples include glaciers melting at more than double speed; bird and swine flu outbreaks, spreading out from domesticated poultry and pigs; millennia-long accumulation of fossil fuels and their exhaustion over a few centuries of industrial practices; clear-cut logging of old growth redwood forests, many of which were seedlings before the birth of Christ, and so on. These examples raise the question of how to nurture a capacity to intuit durations beyond those of immediate concern and appropriation. How do we recognize and learn to dwell in the durations of others not present to us? Can we cultivate presumptive generosity towards other styles of duration? To what degree do we belong to others' durations? Where does one form of life begin or end, and what about the environment?

Such questions were anticipated by Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexküll, whose research attempted to rethink the world as infinite animal environments (*Umwelten*) in order to gain better insight into what it means to be an animal. Influenced by Kant's philosophy, Uexküll insists that our knowledge of the natural world cannot exceed an

irreducible world of experience and that “all reality is subjective appearance.”⁸² Animals are subjects and there are as many worlds as subjects, interwoven in a “web of life that extends in all directions uniting both living and nonliving things into a cohesive design.”⁸³ Each organism constructs its own *Umwelt* through the interpretive work of signs that are important to it, while at the same time, creating signs for others.⁸⁴ From this perspective, the task of biology is to discern these “subjective universes” and elucidate how the world appears to each organism according to its own perceptions and actions.⁸⁵

Uexküll uses the metaphor of a soap bubble encircling every living being within a defined parameter, beyond which certain things are no longer meaningful and significant to it. In *Onto-Theologies* Brett Buchanan recounts a range of examples drawn from Uexküll’s empirical research on the bubble-like *Umwelts* of animals. Among them, the life of the tick stands out:

Nearly everything in the external world that surrounds the tick has no significance to it. The moon, weather, birds, noises, leaves, shadows, and so forth do not matter to the tick. They may belong to the *Umwelt* of other organisms that live in the midst of the tick, but they do not carry any meaning for the tick itself... What does matter to the tick, however, is the sensory perception of heat and sweat from a warm-blooded animal, on which the female tick feeds, lays its eggs, and dies... Uexküll recounts how ticks will position themselves in a hanging position on the tip of a tree branch in the anticipation of a mammal passing beneath the branch... After mating, the blind and deaf tick is first drawn upward by the photoreceptivity of her skin. While the tick hangs on a branch, very little affects it. The tick does not feed itself, shelter itself, or engage in any other activities. It simply waits. And, remarkably, ticks have been noted to hang motionless for up to eighteen years at a time until a precise environmental cue eventually triggers it from its rest. This span of time encompasses nearly the entire life span of the tick, and it does so until the tick senses a specific odor emanating from the butyric acid (sweat) of a mammal... the tick releases itself from the branch in order to fall onto the hair of the moving mammal... Once the tick has bored itself in, it sucks the mammal’s blood until the warm blood reaches the tick’s stomach, at which time a biological response is activated, and the sperm cells that a male has already deposited and are waiting in the female are released to fertilize the awaiting eggs. This reproductive action will not occur if the foregoing sequence of events does not first take place.⁸⁶

Many ticks never make it through the full cycle, and those who do, die soon after. Yet this observation does not diminish the importance of the tick's *Umwelt* for Uexküll, which appears to him as a living play of signs and interpretations. The mammal (the "meaning-carrier") elicits certain "signs" that become significant within the phenomenal world of the tick (the "meaning-receiver") as they are actively "interpreted" by the tick—a meaningful relationship is formed.⁸⁷ Moreover, the odor of mammalian sweat that triggers the tick's release from the branch may be of little or no significance to other organisms. Instead, the mammal may be perceived in multiple other ways: "Perhaps the mammal is a dog out for a walk in the woods. Just as the mammal belongs within the *Umwelt* of the tick, the mammal may equally belong to my own *Umwelt*, albeit with a different significance. And while the dog may not notice the tick, it may notice a squirrel to chase or a twig to play with."⁸⁸ Thus, it becomes evident that the various animal worlds and durations intersect with one another, extending the notion of *Umwelt* beyond the soap bubble. Uexküll deploys a musical reference to describe how each organism enters into relationships with different aspects of its environment: "We see here [in pairs] the first comprehensive musical laws of nature. All living beings have their origin in a duet...The harmony of performances is most clearly visible in the colonies of ants and honeybees. Here we have completely independent individuals that keep up the life of the colony through the harmony of the individual performances"⁸⁹ Each living being is always already other than itself and composes a "symphony underscored by rhythms and melodies reaching outward for greater accompaniment."⁹⁰ Within this plane of nature as a musical score, the mammal emits tones, rhythms, and chiming vibrations that complement and interlace with the tick's own.

The music of tick-mammal life brings us back to the multiple force fields and tiers of nonhuman time revealed by the practice of eco-sensation. The encounter and temporary overlap of two very different styles of duration leads to the formation of a new duet, of a new ontological unit, that exceeds its constitutive elements and affirms the force of time as becoming. Out of the tick-mammal composite emerges a new tick, ready to serve its eighteen years on the branch. Just like the spider, which has adopted certain tunes from the fly's symphony and constructs its web with a view towards the fly's arrival, the tick demonstrates an "embodied 'anticipatory power' for the 'aboutness'" of its own body and immediate environment.⁹¹ Each animal in question becomes another through its various encounters and compositional relations. Perhaps, this corporeal understanding of otherness refers to a different mode of nonhuman and bodily time ("anticipation-time") not entirely reducible to intentionality and semiotic interpretation. Finally, it seems pertinent to ask: Do these connections concern "individuals" or "beings" per se? Uexküll's *Umwelten* involve whole organisms (and molar entities) as much as the complex interplay of inorganic forces such as passive and active affects, temperatures, and speeds and slownesses within each individuated soap bubble. The connections are not necessarily between a tick and a mammal, a spider and a fly, but might be between an olfactory organ and a compound of odor-temperature, a net and a line of flight, one rhythmic wave with another.⁹² The tick and the spider are compounds of sensations, activated by arrivals of the mammal and the fly.

Art can capture these flows of affects and connections and enable us to perceive durations and *Umwelts* not already in tune with our own rhythms. Redwood artwork in the American West, African earthen compounds, installation art such as Robert

Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* and Serra's *Torqued Ellipses* have already monumentalized the earth's diverse geography and infinite color intensities. The BBC series *Blue Planet: Seas of Life* and *Planet Earth*, Werner Herzog's and Peter Raymont's films continue to trace rare movements of the world and the impossible territories and intimate durations of some of the planet's wildest and most elusive creatures. We move from the perception of a redwood cone falling from a tree, actualized into the tick's release from a branch, to the farmed soil across which a mammal runs, and to the river, into which it leaps to play as it disturbs the river's inhabitants. Then, we travel from the sheets of geological time to the cycles of seasons and ocean tides and immerse into the incessant flow of becoming of the world, whose altered ecologies call for a new generation of artists to come.

The proposed art practice of eco-sensation encourages us to gain practical and bodily insights into the multiple ways in which anthropocentric attitudes and feelings become sedimented into different layers of the body/brain network, to incorporate that knowledge into future ecological thought and action, and to experiment with body/brain interventions that may stretch and distend human-centered patterns of thought, feeling, and judgment.⁹³ Each encounter with earthworks triggers side perceptions at odds with the dominant drifts of perception and interpretation; it reworks the body's implicit self-image in its ever-ready tendency to fall back into a narrow humanism.

Of course, neither the arguments nor the illustrations in this chapter *prove* the truth of this practice. I doubt that such a definitive proof will emerge, and as such the practice of eco-sensation is profoundly contestable. Thus it is crucial to emphasize the need to complement these experiments with a range of other macropolitical experiments and arts of the self that nurture ecological dispositions. Such complementary practices,

such as interim visualization, meditation, yoga, nature walks and hiking, biking, multi-media strategies, or practices of feeling with others (human and nonhuman), may enhance the efficacy of these art interventions. Nonetheless, as we move back and forth between micro- and macropolitics, between experimentation, observation, and reflection, among creative readings of science and analytical and critical philosophy, we develop better strategies to interrupt the flow of all-too human-centered thought and to open windows to creative experimentation.

¹ Here earthworks are defined as both pre-existing sites on the land and artistic interventions that have marked, constructed, or demarcated territory without disturbing the integrity of natural processes. See Jeffrey Kastner, ed., *Land and Environmental Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998).

² In the present study sensation refers to a pre-individual and incipient cognitive plane of intensities and forces that both constitute and act upon the body. Sensation is that which strikes the viewer of a painting before the meaning of the narrative and figurative givens of the canvas is perceived. Deleuze sees art as a mode of bodily intensification of sensations that enables us to tap into the flux of life marked by the coexistence of multiple durations, force fields, and tiers of time. From this perspective, duration is a mode of time that underlies creative becoming, the irreversible flow of differentiation in the universe. Duration is not chronological or successive clock-time that can be broken into minutes, hours, days, etc. or can be spatialized into linear progression. Duration is an intensive multiplicity in which the alteration of one point or singularity changes the qualitative composition of the durational whole. The notion of duration is not limited to the human estate. One way to conceive of the flow of time is as multiple durations of different speeds and becomings that characterize life as the power to differ and create new folds.

³ Claire Colebrook, *Deleuze: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2006), 9.

⁴ Here I am indebted to both Elizabeth Grosz and Claire Colebrook. Colebrook's book *Deleuze: A Guide for the Perplexed* has enabled me to think more clearly about this relationship between life, chaos, and thinking in Deleuze's philosophy.

⁵ I advance a notion of eco-philosophy that builds on the work of Jane Bennett. See Bennett, "Spinoza and Ecophilosophy: Some Problems." Class Presentation, December 2009.

⁶ William E. Connolly, "Experience and Experiment," *Daedalus* 135, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 67.

⁷ This provisional definition emerged from a range of insights drawn from Bennett's presentation and from the Fall 2009 seminar "Spinoza and Ecophilosophy," co-taught by William Connolly and Jane Bennett at Johns Hopkins University.

⁸ Davide Panagia, *The Political Life of Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009). In this work Panagia poses a radical challenge to *narratocracy* (i.e., the "privileging of narrative as a genre for the exposition of claims and ideas") as the prevailing regime of perception in critical political theorizing (12). Panagia makes a compelling case to move beyond the rule of narrative towards recognition of sensation as a key dimension of political life: "the first political act is also an aesthetic one, a partitioning of sensation that divides the body and its organs of sense perception and assigns to them corresponding capacities for the making of sense." (9) As an interruption of sense and "experience of unrepresentability," sensation is indispensable for identifying critical ethico-political moments and occasions for relinquishing our attachments and reconfiguring our ways of perceiving the world. If the aesthetic dimension of authority helps to imprison us in submission, the approaches that seek to sustain discontinuity (by relating the experiences sensation affords) offer new possibilities for suspending authority and transforming the political order. Another high point of Panagia's text emerges from his insight that "the contemporary

subject is a viewing subject” and that contemporary democratic theory needs to engage micropolitical techniques that pluralize our postures of visibility (19). Thus, I want to acknowledge an intellectual debt between my discussion of the practices of eco-sensation that aim to disarticulate and trouble received anthropocentric regimes of perception and Panagia’s account of sensation as a radical democratic moment. This chapter shares Panagia’s agenda to stretch and unsettle established tendencies by opening new relations. In the case of eco-sensation, the tendencies in the other direction are partly built right into action-oriented perception and partly into inordinate drives to human superiority. While I try to remain attentive to the fact that we have preorganized starting points that enable perception, these dispositions are not transcendental in the strong sense, and hence can be modified through new micropolitical strategies such as the strategies proposed in Panagia’s book.

⁹ The notions of nonhuman affectivity, thing-power, and affective bodies are drawn from Jane Bennett’s book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010). Bennett theorizes a vibrant materiality that runs alongside and within humans in an attempt to make us more alert to how the stories we tell ourselves about matter shape our identities as humans and political beings. Bennett aims to detach materiality from philosophical figures of inert substance and, along the way, calls into question ontological binaries such as life/matter, human/nonhuman, nature/culture, etc. She argues that things, events, and objects produce various (sometimes positive, sometimes harmful) effects in human and other bodies and that they possess a form of political agency marked by its own histories, objectives and trajectories. In her view, this thingly, material power requires us to amend received notions of agency, freedom, and politics. One way Bennett seeks to rethink political agency is through the Spinozist model of conative bodies, based on the idea that bodies strive to enhance their power by forming alliances with other bodies. The power of each body to affect other bodies involves a corresponding capacity to be affected. What this tendency of bodies to increase their power in or as heterogeneous assemblages suggests for the concept of agency, according to Bennett, is that “the efficacy or effectivity to which that term has traditionally referred becomes distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized in a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts” (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 23).

¹⁰ Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 10.

¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 184.

¹² Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 35, 63.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 65-68.

¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 185.

¹⁶ Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 76.

¹⁷ Colebrook, *Deleuze: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 95-98, 103; Daniel Smith, “Deleuze’s Theory of Sensation: Overcoming the Kantian Duality,” in *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, ed. Paul Patton (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 43.

¹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 169.

¹⁹ Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 74-75.

²⁰ “Sensation is excitation itself, not insofar as it is gradually prolonged and passes into reaction but insofar it is preserved or preserves its vibrations. Sensation contracts the vibrations of the stimulant on a nervous surface or in a cerebral volume: what comes before has not yet disappeared when what follows appears. This is its way of responding to chaos. Sensation itself vibrates because it contacts vibrations. It preserves itself because it preserves vibrations: it is Monument. It resonates because it makes its harmonics resonate.” (Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 211).

²¹ Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 77.

²² Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 211; Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 80.

²³ Tate Britain, Curatorial Statement, *Francis Bacon Exhibition* (London: Tate Museum), www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/francisbacon/

²⁴ Smith, “Deleuze’s Theory of Sensation: Overcoming the Kantian Duality,” 44.

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- ²⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 18, 29.
- ²⁶ Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, 32-33.
- ²⁷ Smith, "Deleuze's Theory of Sensation: Overcoming the Kantian Duality," 46.
- ²⁸ Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, 61.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 60, 62.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 69.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Ibid., 54.
- ³³ Here I am indebted to Ronald Bogue's discussion of Bacon's body without organs. See Ronald Bogue, "Gilles Deleuze: The Aesthetics of Force," in *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, ed. Paul Patton (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 261-64.
- ³⁴ Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, 22.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 19-20.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 22.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 39.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 41,
- ³⁹ Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, 42; Bogue, "Gilles Deleuze: The Aesthetics of Force," 262.
- ⁴⁰ Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, 42.
- ⁴¹ William E. Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 10.
- ⁴² Corey Shores, "Flying Figures [60] Triptych, 1970. Deleuze on Bacon, Painting Series," Weblog, *Pirates and Revolutionaries*, 21 February 2010, Blogspot, 20 March 2010, <http://piratesandrevolutionaries.blogspot.com/2010/02/flying-figures-60-triptych-1970-deleuze.html>
- ⁴³ Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, 101.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 156.
- ⁴⁵ Kastner, *Land and Environmental Art*, 58.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid.
- ⁴⁷ Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 17.
- ⁴⁸ In order to develop these insights on time I draw on Simon O'Sullivan's excellent study of Smithson's mobilization of different temporalities. See Simon O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought beyond Representation* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 107, 119.
- ⁴⁹ Stephen Zepke, "Eco-Aesthetics: Beyond Structure in the Work of Robert Smithson, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari," in *Deleuze/Guattari & Ecology*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (London: Palgrave, 2009), 211.
- ⁵⁰ William E. Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 27.
- ⁵¹ Richard Serra, "Notes on The Matter of Time," in *Richard Serra: The Matter of Time* (Bilbao: Steidl Publishers, 2005), 141; PBS Website, "Richard Serra: Biography," *Art: 21*, <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/serra/#>.
- ⁵² Guggenheim Bilbao Website, "The Matter of Time Educational Sheet," *Guggenheim Museum Bilbao*, July 8, 2005, 3, www.guggenheim.nombrexposicionmaterialrecursos.php?idioma=en&id_exposicion=64&tipo_recurso=3.
- ⁵³ Serra, "Notes on The Matter of Time," 141.
- ⁵⁴ Guggenheim Bilbao, "The Matter of Time Educators Guide," 20,
- ⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ⁵⁶ PBS Website, "Richard Serra: Snake," *Art: 21*, <http://www.pbs.org/art21/slideshow/?slide=573&artindex=148>.
- ⁵⁷ Guggenheim Bilbao, "The Matter of Time Educators Guide," 22.
- ⁵⁸ Serra, "Notes on The Matter of Time," 141.
- ⁵⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 216.

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- ⁶⁰ Labelle Prussin, "An Introduction to Indigenous African Architecture," *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 33, no. 3 (October 1974): 184.
- ⁶¹ Prussin, "An Introduction to Indigenous African Architecture," 204-5.
- ⁶² For an illuminating ethnography of Kasena houses as living bodies see Ann Cassiman, *Stirring Life: Women's Paths and Places among the Kasena of Northern Ghana* (Uppsala, Sweden: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2006).
- ⁶³ Kropp Dakubu, Awinkene Arintono, and Avea Nsoh, *Gurene - English Dictionary* (Legon, Ghana: Linguistics Department, University of Ghana, 2007), 192.
- ⁶⁴ House Builders, interview by Anatoli Ignatov and Jacqueline Ignatov, January 6, 2013.
- ⁶⁵ "The family compound reveals not only the interrelationships that obtain at a given point in time, but also internal changes that take place over time, from its inception, through its growth, and ending ultimately in its disintegration, when the compound structure is abandoned, its hollow shell crumbling back to Earth." (Labelle Prussin, *Architecture in Northern Ghana: A Study of Forms and Functions* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969], 65); Prussin, "An Introduction to Indigenous African Architecture," 205.
- ⁶⁶ House Builders, interview by Anatoli Ignatov and Jacqueline Ignatov, January 06, 2013.
- ⁶⁷ Labelle Prussin, "Foreword: The Anthropology of Architecture and the Architecture of Anthropology" in *Architectures of Belonging: Inhabiting Worlds in Rural West Africa*, ed. Ann Cassiman (Antwerp: BAI Publishers, 2011), 14.
- ⁶⁸ Prussin, *Architecture in Northern Ghana*, 58-61; Prussin, "An Introduction to Indigenous African Architecture," 196.
- ⁶⁹ Ann Cassiman, "Bodies of Belonging: An Ethnography of the Kasena House," in *Architectures of Belonging: Inhabiting Worlds in Rural West Africa*, ed. Ann Cassiman (Antwerp: BAI Publishers, 2011), 61.
- ⁷⁰ House Builders, interview by Anatoli Ignatov and Jacqueline Ignatov, January 6, 2013.
- ⁷¹ Prussin, *Architecture in Northern Ghana*, 62.
- ⁷² House Builders, interview by Anatoli Ignatov and Jacqueline Ignatov, January 6, 2013.
- ⁷³ On the edge of the *zanyɔre* is the rubbish heap, a towering heap of all kinds of leftovers, house waste and broken pots and calabashes, overgrown by grasses and traversed by scratching fowls picking their way back and forth. The *tampugere* embodies the vitality and productivity of each compound. In certain compounds where crocodiles are regarded as ancestors, the animals come and lay their eggs on the rubbish heap.
- ⁷⁴ Fred Smith, "Compound Entryway Decoration Male Space and Female Creativity," *African Arts* 19, no. 3 (May, 1986): 52.
- ⁷⁵ Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 105.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.
- ⁷⁷ Cassiman, "Bodies of Belonging," 66.
- ⁷⁸ Intuition here refers to a philosophical method proposed by Henri Bergson that seeks to move us beyond the mediation of formal conceptual logic (indispensable for organizing and ordering experience and orienting our practical action) to a mode of direct access to the flux of life and those layers of experience that are not action-oriented. Intuition allows us to grasp the constant change, fecundity, and multiplicity of this experience. Deleuze reads intuition as "the movement by which we emerge from our own duration, by which we make use of our own duration to affirm and immediately recognize the existence of other durations, above or below us" (Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, 33). Thus intuition may enable us to transcend our habituated human point of view. One way to conceive of intuition is as a mode of attunement and dwelling in fecund moments of disequilibrium that allows us to discern creativity as incipience and as something that passes through oneself as a series of unformed possibilities. The close encounter with the ever-shifting lifecycles of African earthen architecture triggers a form of intuition that brings awareness of the intersection of multiple durations and degrees of creativity not limited to the human alone.
- ⁷⁹ Harry Garuba, "Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society," *Public Culture* 15, no. 2 (2003): 280.
- ⁸⁰ Colebrook, *Deleuze: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 18.
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Brett Buchanan, *Onto-Ethologies: The Animal Environments of Uexküll, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Deleuze* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008), 15-16.

⁸³ Buchanan, *Onto-Ethologies*, 2, 20, 22.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 2, 22

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 36.

⁹³ Connolly, "Experience and Experiment," 71.

Chapter 5

How Land Speaks: Orature and Ecological Change



WHEN THE HUNTER AND THE WARRIOR MET THE LAND

The chief's skin-bearer guided us to the *tindaana's* house. The chief himself would not dare walk past the junior high school, explained the skin-bearer. The school was the cut-off line for maintaining a safe distance from the *tindaana's* house: "When you see the house then that should be the end of your life."¹ In the past, when there were no other houses to shelter the *tindaana's* house from view, each time the chief traveled to the district capital one of his companions had to use a fan to cover his face, to prevent him from looking in that direction. Recently, the chief was unable to attend the opening of the community library because of its proximity to the *tindaana's* house.

Once we veered off the main road we took our shoes off, observing the ancestral taboo not to approach or enter the *tindaana's* compound wearing footwear. After an exchange of greetings, we sat under an old tamarind tree—the founding tree of the community—adjacent to a towering wall of whispering okro plants. Chickens rushed

agitatedly around. The *tindaana* not only felt very comfortable with our audio recorder but also requested we tape the whole conversation in order to make sure that we wouldn't "forget what I say." By the time the recorder was on, the *tindaana*'s wives, children, and elders had joined in, listening attentively to what he had to say. We were about to become immersed in the world of *orature*, the fusion of art forms and the means by which African oral traditions of political thought advance competing images of power, authority, and collectivity. The *tindaana* proceeded to tell us the town's founding story:

It was first settled by the Busansis – the whole area. The ancestor was a hunter and came and met the land here. That was his first settled place and that is the tree that stands here, the ancestor tree...When he at first arrived the Busansis drove him away...He was travelling, then he got to a riverside. There he met some two young children and asked them to give him water. One of them ran away but one of them stayed back...The child brought him to the Nayiri. He got to some place and wanted to settle. There are some people who are driving him away and these are the Busansis. And the chief said that he should sleep for that night. That he would...help him in the country where he wants to settle...Then the next day he invited all his sons. The child who stayed back and gave him the water – that was the one. Then the hunter took that boy. The father asked, the chief asked – "but this young boy who is very small, how is going to help you, defend you back in Zua?" [The hunter replied] that he is the one who saved him by giving him the water at the riverside so he wants the small boy. And he came with that small boy. And the father suggested that when they get back to Zua they should tie some grasses on all the trees that are found within the Busansi area. And when they arrived they intimidated the clan and the Busansis took off. And when they finally settled he sent the small boy back to the chief and said that this place is now multiplying. He is the owner of the land but should give them somebody – a chief – to administer the place. Since he is the landowner, he cannot be the chief so he should give the chieftaincy to the small boy...Then the chief asked the hunter – their founder – what should be the name of the child. The name is Akulegene – "he met him by the riverside." And that is why now you have the chief under Nayiri, he is from the small boy's family...And the *tindaana* is the landowner...When anyone dies the *tindaana* goes to make some soil cutting before a grave is dug or before he is buried. That's his role. Any *tingane*, most of the *tingana* – he sacrifices to them. Any stray animal – whether it is a cow, a donkey or a stray animal – any animal that is not known, is found and brought to him. Anybody who wants to resettle – he has to go and cut the soil before the house is put up. They have to clear the area before anything can be done...The whole of this clan – if there is a problem, it's first settled here. If it is too much to be handled he refers them to the chief, to his place.²

A few days after the defeat of the Busansi the new occupants of the land decided to perform sacrifices for their triumph over the enemy. In preparation, they piled some stones. When they were all gathered to pour the libation a python (*zankaŋa*) crawled out of the stone pile and returned back in. Struck by fear, Abantaŋa, the hunter, led a delegation to learn about the appearance and the disappearance of the snake. The delegation was informed that the python (*zankaŋa*) was the spirit of their great-grandfather who had come in that form to live with them. The area in which the snake was residing became an earth shrine (*tingane*) known as Azankaŋa. The name was later “corrupted to Zua” by white men who could not pronounce it properly.

According to the *tindaana*, the most important thing that we had to learn about the town was the story of how his ancestor had come to settle in Zua—a story that emphasized the *tindaana*’s contemporary role as a custodian of Azua and the land. The chief presented us with a competing version of the same events:

I want to begin by giving the story of how my ancestors started from Zua. Zua was started by our great ancestor Akulegene and Abantaŋa. They first came to occupy this place and the first occupants were the Busansis. So the history is that we are all descendants of Akulegene who happened to be the first chief and then the son of the king of Mamprugu. So we are all descendants of the Mamprugu kingdom... Akulegene came at a time when Azua already existed. He got to identify Azua – that is where they came and sat to strategize. They came and they cut the grass and tied it to the trees and set fire. That scared the first occupants and they ran away and left the place and they took over. While they were strategizing they saw a big python that crawled out from the cave, from the Azua, and moved into the rocks just behind that place where they sat. When they succeeded in driving the first occupants away they went back and reported to the King of Mamprugu and he decided to enskin his son, who was known as Akulegene, and then asked: “what is going to be the name of the place?” And Abantaŋa who was the hunter, who led Akulegene to come and take over the first occupants, said that while they were strategizing they saw a very big python that crawled out of the cave and did not harm them. So the python in Mampruli is called “zankaŋa.” It means the name of this place was originally supposed to be called “zankaŋa” but because the whites could not pronounce “zankaŋa”, it just ended up “Zua.”³

Initially, the chief's story sounded confusingly similar to me. The nuances, however, were of great significance to its different interlocutors, and people went to great lengths to ensure that I got the "right" version. The chief's account of the settlement history accentuated the leadership of the young Mamprusi warrior, rather than that of the hunter, and the chain of events that led to the formation of the chieftaincy, rather than of the *tindaana*-ship. Such variations bolstered the chief's contemporary position as "the custodian of the land," claiming responsibility for the day-to-day administration of his jurisdictional area: "The *tindaana* is the one responsible for the sacrifices to the gods because the chief himself does not perform the sacrifices. The chief has to delegate the *tindaana* to do that...the *tindaana* performs that one. But he comes to me. When I want to perform the sacrifices, I'll call him, he'll come here, and I will be giving him whatever I have to do to go out and perform and he will now go out and perform."⁴



Azua earth god (*tingane*)



African rock python

Today Azua is reputed for assisting people with commercial enterprises, procreation, and war, and for bringing rain during droughts. The ascension rites of each newly-enslaved chief take place at the *tingane*. Azua, an elder explained to me once, influences the lives of children named after it: Azua, Azua-Soo, Azua-Maa, etc. The

python (*zankana*) is treated with fear and veneration by the members of the royal clan (*Nabisi*) who taboo the harming, killing, or eating of all pythons. They swear oaths in the name of the snake during arguments in court when trying to establish the veracity of statements. The *tindaana*'s clan (*Tindaama*) observes a series of taboos regarding the crocodile. A few days after their founding father was buried a crocodile came forth. The crocodile was identified as their great-grandfather who had come in that form to visit them. Like the *Nabisi*, the *Tindaama* swear oaths to the crocodile when the truth of a court statement is in doubt.⁵

The longer I listened to such stories the more I was struck by the wealth of proliferating narratives and competing versions advanced by different chiefs, *tindaanas*, and elders. Yet all these stories shared something in common: a courageous hunter-ancestor ventured into the bush in search of a new home, encountering various collectivities made up of the land, bush spirits, wild animals, or/and other people, some of whom were ill-disposed and antagonistic, and others collaborative and affable. What are such stories about? Are they chronicles of how rural African societies have historically secured, contested, and negotiated access to land as a set of “resources?” Are the stories themselves partly generated by what the land—as gift-giving ancestors—had to say about her encounters with hunters and warriors? Are founding stories parables that teach young people how to relate to other beings and the environment? And how does our understanding of what “political power” is shift once we take into account the transforming relations of power between the chieftaincy and the *tindaana*-ship? How do such stories work to shape political sensibilities, attachments, and identities? Can they be understood as techniques of political persuasion that advance competing concepts of

power and collectivity? How is the power of words deployed? How are publics formed in Northern Ghana, and who counts as a participant in such publics? Elders? Pythons? The ancestors?

Carola Lentz has noted that such narratives of “first-comer” encounters serve as a kind of oral land registry which “legitimate[s] the origin of property rights and construct[s] a link between the founding ancestors and the storyteller (and his group) through which the rights established by first possession have been transmitted to the current proprietors.”⁶ In Northern Ghana, the question of who owns the land is inextricably connected to the issue of “who came first.” Since colonialism, the nation-state has asserted its authority as the ultimate guarantor of land tenure and property rights, either by constructing land as a national domain or by providing legal frameworks that define the extent to which “customary” law and the land tenure systems that predated it will be recognized. However, many African governments have not commanded the resources to effectively enforce such national land legislation. Only 5% of all West African land is titled, i.e. owned and registered under formal, state-controlled cadastral systems.⁷ The rest is held under a multiplicity of customary claims and land tenure interests often enshrined in the kind of narratives that the *tindaana* and the chief told us. Such oral land registries can be constantly refashioned, and reveal property as a complex form of social persuasion and negotiation among a variety of stakeholders.

There are limits, however, to relying exclusively on categories such as “property,” “claims,” “resources,” “competition,” and “ownership” to comprehend these proliferating and competing origin stories. The cultural organization of Western disbelief and its profound skepticism that the ancestors can speak in anything but a metaphorical sense

eludes the grasp of Euro-American political theory and the environmentalisms that sprout from it. If the social scientist does not believe that the python is a deceased human but does believe that the Gurensi believe that it is, then she is left with the problem of how to theorize such “beliefs.”⁸ Within a theoretical framework imported from the West and built upon Western concepts of human-nature interactions, the diversity of people’s lived encounters with a personified, non-appropriable, and life-generating land (*tiŋa*) recede behind anthropocentric vocabularies of “land management.” Western beliefs about the land as an inert, passive, and inanimate context for human action, on the other hand, are never on the examining table. What if we took seriously the possibility that what we call animist or anthropomorphic “projections” are themselves formed by the influence of nonhumans? What if the personification of land, animals, and plants was already a conjoint more-than-human act?

In chapter 2 I argued that an alternative way to understand the relationship between people and *tiŋa* is in terms of *spiritual or ritual enclosures*—ways of apprehending the land without possessing it as enclosed commons. In many parts of Northern Ghana it is the dead—the ancestors and the earth gods—who are recognized as the actual “owners” of the land. *Tindaanas* (earth priests) and *Yizuukεεma* (clan elders), and sometimes *Nabas* (chiefs), are land trustees in the sense that they are responsible for addressing the spiritual needs of the land and for holding custody of the ancestral shrine containing the community spirits. But it is the “skin,” the shrine itself that serves as the repository of ownership of the land and not the person of the *tindaana* or the chief. The latter ensures the continuity of gift exchange, knitting a web of socio-ecological relationships between people and the land as fowls, millet flour, people, and words

circulate and create enclosures. Azua's pile of stones entails a particular form of ancestral ordering and enclosing of the land at the same time as the landowners themselves remain enclosed in the womb of the *tiŋa*: "everything comes from the ground. Our crops, the deceased are buried there, everything is contained in the *tiŋa*."⁹

Such a shift of focus, from a mechanistic understanding of land to an expressive one reveals the Zua founding story as a technology of political persuasion with an ecological cast, and not merely a contested oral registry of the origin of property or reluctant admission of a land grab. The story iterates a form of social contract and political pact with nature (and with the spiritual realm), forged through the direct, unmediated intercourse between the hunter, the warrior, the land, and its various animal inhabitants. But from within a perspective that divides the world into human subjects and object-nature, this locating of village identity and property in the ancestors' encounters with nature is likely to be seen as a shrewd strategy to remove such encounters from the volatility and historicity of human politics.¹⁰ Correspondingly, Western representations of the realm of politics (chieftaincy) and the realm of ritual (*tindaana*-ship) as two distinct spheres of social action obscure how the postcolonial state and chieftaincy have appropriated indigenous forms of political authority that had been part of the prerogatives of *tindaanas* and elders.¹¹ My goal is to offer an alternative to treatments of African indigenous perspectives as "supernatural beliefs" and "ritual," reviewing them instead as modalities of political thought that count the land, the living, and the dead as co-participants in a polity.

This chapter will also draw political theory and ethnography into an engagement with orature. The term "orature" was coined by the Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu to

counter the tendency to treat the oral traditions of African thought as an inferior stage in a linear evolution towards modern literature and writing. Zirimu defined orature as “the use of utterance as an aesthetic means of expression” characterized by the fusion of all art forms.¹² In the next two sections I put Gurensi orature into dialogue with Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of “minor literature,” which refers to a way of appropriating language as a “collective utterance” to call forth new identities and sensitivities, which in some senses are already there, albeit masked by dominant habits of representation (“major” literature). Minor literature does not occur “apart from” a major literature but, on the contrary, operates from within, making dominant anthropocentric models of language “stutter.” Likewise, orature sounds and makes perceptible what has not or cannot be heard or perceived otherwise: how land speaks. By sensitizing us to the expressivity of the land, pythons, crocodiles, and baobab trees, orature too affects a “stutter” in the majoritarian orientations of Euro-American environmental political theory. It gives voice to the “subjugated” knowledges and *earthen* languages of African people that trouble the dual colonization of the aural-oral by the literary and of nonhumans by humans.

Put together, the concepts of orature and minor literature can strengthen our appreciation of a set of already existing African and marginalized Euro-American ecological knowledges and practices, though my focus in this chapter is on the former. As a result, what counts as agency, knowledge, and authority begins to shift. 1) Agency: speaking to the ancestors becomes a way of registering the land’s expressivity and nature’s powers to act in tandem with humans, rather than metaphoric “projections” of human society into nature; 2) Knowledge: becomes a heightened perceptual sensitivity that reveals the landscape itself and history-making objects to be participants in orature,

rather than a set of claims “passed down” from generation to generation; 3) Authority: becomes a composite more-than-human domain made up of competing sovereignties of earth (*tindaana*-ship) and state (chieftaincy), rather than an exclusively human set of governance designs and practices.

SPEAKING WITH THE ANCESTORS: ORATURE, PERFORMANCE, CEREMONY

When I was born, my umbilical cord was cut. Then it was buried in the soil. A tree was planted on the spot. The tree of my life has more meanings to it, figurative and metaphorical. Planting a tree with my umbilical cord also involved the act of implanting ideas of conservation in me. Respect for nature. The organic link between me and a tree requires me to have that special respect. In many African societies, even in Sri Lanka I learn, you cannot cut a tree without first speaking to it, or its ancestors, asking for permission. You must have a good reason!...The umbilical cord is not only a link between mother and child, it is also a link with those of the nation who for time immemorial lay underground; whose spirit nourishes us in our struggles for survival, beauty and heightened living. My sculptures in organic materials are a celebration of this fact. I collect branches, roots, stems, leaves of different shapes, grains and sizes. I leave them lying about for months, sometimes years, to re-establish a relationship with them. I do not try to ‘tame’ or ‘alter’ the wood or nature. I work with it, to heighten the hidden forms and messages. It is a partnership.

PITIKA NTULI, *Orature: A Self-Portrait*



Baare (granary)

When a Gurensi child is born the foundation of the granary is chiseled and the child's umbilical cord is placed in a shea nut shell, stored at the base of the granary. The granary contains the record of the children in the house and it is taboo to destroy it. It is an earthen record of the ancestral potency of the land revealed both in abundant harvests and the fertility of households. Like the tree planted with Ntuli's umbilical cord that intertwines the ancestors with human and nonhuman nature, the granary connects the newborn to the earthen compound and to the fertility of the earth as reciprocating ancestors. Orature renders perceptible such more-than-human "partnerships" and interdependencies. It draws together ecology, art, ritual, and politics, making it difficult to demarcate one "sphere" from the others. In what follows, I turn first to Pitika Ntuli and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o to explore how the concept of orature has been theorized in African arts and literature. Next I put Ntuli and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o into dialogue with Gurensi and Boosi orature to highlight a set of performances that draws upon such interdependencies between humans, animals, and the earth.

Zirimu's concept of orature—an oral system of aesthetics and a mode of political thinking that does not draw its validity from the literary—was developed in the eighties by the pan-African, London-based performance collective *African Dawn*. Bringing together performing artists from Zimbabwe, South Africa, Grenada, Ghana, Kenya, and Senegal, *African Dawn* enlisted the concept of orature to theorize the integration of different art forms by the Black arts movement in Britain:

A common point of departure for many Black artists is the defiance of formal artistic boundaries, specialization and the fragmentation of social experience. There is a conscious articulation of diverse and disparate elements of creativity, often organized in new exciting spaces. Many black artists work in various media simultaneously, forging creative links, collaborations and alliances. This state of

consciousness, a reflection of African and Asian attitudes to creativity, is called orature.¹³

In that passage Kwesi Owusu, one of the members of *African Dawn*, is expanding upon the insights about orature of the South African sculptor and poet Pitika Ntuli. Ntuli had moved to Britain from Swaziland, his adopted country, where “the fusion of art forms, to be a poet, painter, sculptor, musician, actor, all in one, can be just a matter of course. Ceremonies, rituals, fuse all art forms to allow for a cross fertilization within the same setting and time.”¹⁴ But in Britain he found himself living in a state of permanent disconnectedness, in different “hermetically sealed” compartments simultaneously.¹⁵ He began to use his environment both physically and metaphorically to render visible hidden connections and to animate “modern” objects and phenomena:

I salvage weapons of war against ugliness. I attempt to humanize objects, exhaust pipes, gearboxes, saucepans; curses, insults, appreciation, grey clouds, monotonous terraces, odd patches of colour in parks, human touch, frustration and hopes...my raw materials. Orature is more than the fusion of all art forms. It is the conception and reality of a total view of life. It is the capsule of feeling, thinking, imagination, taste and hearing. It is the flow of a creative spirit...Orature is the universe of expression and appreciation and fusion of both within one individual, a group, a community. It is a weapon against the encroaching atomization of life.¹⁶

The integrative nature of orature elides the formal boundaries between the written and the oral, between human speech or voice and art-objects’ expression. Orature as an art form positions African artists in exile as cross-cultural envoys who connect with centers of inspiration and creativity in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean without relinquishing their claims to authority within Britain.¹⁷ Orature also enables Ntuli to perform a series of reciprocal relationships with nature concealed by the compartmentalization of Western industrial society: “I do not try to ‘tame’ or ‘alter’ the wood or nature. I work with it, to heighten the hidden forms and messages. It is a partnership.” He seeks to enter into

dialogue with each piece of wood that he carves, rather than “tame” it, making perceptible and available to his international audience the conservationist sensibilities nurtured in the womb of his African mother-environment.

In *Globalectics* Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o concurs with Ntuli that the fusion of art forms in the African traditional practice of orature presumes and cultivates such ecological sensibilities:

Humans are definitely of nature. In that sense they are not different from animals and plants that all depend on the same mother-environment of earth, air, water and sun. Orature assumes this. Hence in the narratives of orature, humans, birds, animals and plants interact freely, often change into each others' forms, and share language... This web of connections reflects the language of nature; the various aspects of nature are in active communications within themselves, for instance, the rain circle of water, vapor, clouds, rain, rivers, lakes, and seas, the subject of poetry and song... Everywhere one looks in nature is a web of connections, even among the seemingly unconnected.¹⁸

For Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the ecological understanding of nature begins with its personification. Orature gives expression to the “language of nature” by proliferating stories of the various connections and interdependencies between humans and nature.¹⁹

The encounter between the hunter, the warrior, and the python in Zua is a case in point. Another commonly told Gurensi story recounts why the crocodile is tabooed amongst the Tindaama clans. One version of the story accentuates how humans and crocodiles change into each others' forms: “their old men turned into crocodiles when they die.”²⁰

According to another version, the two species share a long history of mutual respect, cooperation, and cohabitation. The great-grandfather of these clans set on foot to a neighboring village and came to a river that had burst its banks and flooded the surrounding areas. He was able to cross the river with the help of a crocodile. Since then, each time the descendants of “pioneer” clans saw a crocodile being molested, they would

seize the animal and throw it back into the water. If the crocodile was killed, they would ensure that he was buried and that all funeral customary rites were performed as if he were a human being. Some of the Tindaama clans carve images of the crocodile on the walls of their compounds as a form of protection against malicious spirits and witchcraft.²¹ Likewise, the ancestor of a tindaama clan in Zoko was a hunter who “got lost in the forest and the monkey directed him.”²² Other clans in Zua identify with the dog: “Their ancestor was blind. The dog came and licked his eyes and he was able to see again. These people have a taboo – to kill and eat dog.”²³

In chapter 3 I argued that such alliances across species can be understood as forms of experiential environmentalism, in which humans receive ethical and practical cues from a reciprocating environment. Orature makes visible ecological relations as profoundly communicative and dialogical, de-emphasizing the importance of abstract species frameworks in favor of lived experiences and ethics of coexistence. Such ethics of cultivation becomes realizable to its fullest dimension in performance. It is performance—so central to the aural-oral thought of African and non-African people, though not so readily obvious a feature of Western philosophy—that makes orature (whether a riddle, a proverb, a story, a poem, a song, a sculpture, or a painting) ecologically efficacious.²⁴ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o writes,

The key in all these elements of orature is their interpenetration. Central to them, is performance....Performance involves the performer and audience, and in orature, the performer and audience interact. Anywhere from the fireside, village square, and market place to the shrine can serve as the performance space and mise-en-scene...There is no metaphysics of absence in performance, only that of presence.”²⁵

The conditions of performance are themselves inseparable from the very system of oral aesthetics that they help perpetually generate. These conditions are changing all the time and no two performances can ever be the same.²⁶

There is first of all the performance space, which is entangled with a variety of nonhuman bodies and processes. This could be an open village square, a hut, a compound, or an earth shrine, where interactions literally unfurl within the dynamic materiality of the earth. These spaces tend to be circular; all-uniting but also corresponding to the appearance of the sun and the moon. Then, there is the audience-performer relationship, which involves the participation of the audience, and especially of the elders, as critics, listeners, and performers, blurring the distinctions between creative production and consumption.²⁷ Third, there is the movement of bodies: orature is not only inscribed in the postures and motions of bodies but also in the sounds through which bodies speak.²⁸ Most of all, performance nurtures relatedness and togetherness between people and the environment. The simple act of entering a common space for a sacrifice to the land gods or of enacting a taboo upon an encounter with a crocodile in the bush might make people feel *de facto* more interdependent with their environment. It might effect relatedness by the mere fact of taking place, and by maintaining an ongoing set of relationships with the ancestors on a person-to-person basis about matters of mutual concern and common interest.

Take for example Mdan Koya (literally: “I just farmed the previous year”), the annual ceremony at the beginning of the dry season to give thanks to the ancestors for granting people’s plea for rain and good harvest yield. The *tindaana* consults the soothsayer, and the latter prescribes the appropriate sacrifices to the earth gods. On the

day of the ceremony, the elders bring fowls and calabashes of early millet or guinea corn to the *tindaana*. Then they gather at the community *tinkugere* or *tingane* and sit on the ground. The *tindaana* takes a calabash (*bagere wula*) of water stirred with the flour received from each clan elder. He squats before the *tinkugere* or *tingane* to pour libation on the stone that contains the land spirits. The libation is followed by the sacrifice of the animals whose blood he pours on the stone while chanting: “You have given us food according to our wish, now we come to give you a present of animals, birds, pito, and guinea corn water (zom koom).” In Gurene the chants often consist of “*To e la fo zom paa yinne, la fo belem*” (“Take this up to god and beg...”).²⁹ The *tingane* is petitioned to intervene and supplicate the withdrawn high or sky god (*Yinε*) on behalf of the community for their pleas for rain, fertility, and prosperity.

The withdrawal of the sky god, in Amy Niang’s view, triggers a self-consciously political process through the transfer of the sacred attributes of the sky to the earthly *tingane* and ancestors. This transfer of authority has made nature more receptive to the vicissitudes of human earthly existence. Sacred groves may be now experienced as sites where humans bargain with the ancestors and with the land. In the grove, “the domain of power is an open circle subject to multiple interpretations and the injection of novel ideas and ideals.”³⁰ The personification of landscapes endows them with the capacities to question and tamper with the work of the high god. It gives them latitude to shape creation in ways that may be beneficial or harmful to humans. And the *tindaana* (earth priest) is the mouthpiece of such ancestral needs and designs, voicing the enunciations of an ever-changing environment and the constant undulations of nature into culture and vice versa.³¹ He is a human vehicle for the expressivity of the land and the ancestors.

We will later see that to think of *tindaanas* as “earth priests” is a mistranslation, not least because of the complex socio-political role and expectations attached to the office. Another such cultural import is “sacrifice” or “ritual,” when used to refer to ceremonial reverence for the ancestors even when African idioms and marks of recognition to living and dead elders do not warrant dividing the former from the latter in terms of this-worldly “ceremony” and other-worldly “ritual.” Equally, the “personification” of nature can only accurately mean what the Gurensi and the Boosi, and not we as social scientists, understand by “being a person”: namely, someone with whom one could talk things over.³² The elders who spoke to the ancestors at the *tingane* insisted that their interlocutors were capable of responding willingly to requests and pleas, regardless of whether their bodies were presently human, animal, plant, or mineral. My queries regarding who or what the ancestors were, their shape, size, age, degree of “humanness,” or the language they spoke seemed to be of little significance to the identities of the *yaabas*. People were not interested in what the ancestors had to say about themselves or who/what exactly made it rain but rather in *what the living and the dead could do together* for the community when it needed rains and good crop yields. The intercourse with the ancestors was intended not to further clarify the characters of those involved but to foster immediate action and to cope with the concrete situation that the earth gods were called to assist with.³³

Michael Singleton makes a similar set of observations with regard to the ways in which the WaBungu of Tanzania speak to the ancestors. The aim is interaction and performance, not disquisition: “Western culture, having opted since classical times for the eye rather than the ear, talks of face-to-face communication, *de visu*, with a vis-à-vis.

Our primordial question is ‘with what am I dealing?’ only subsequently do we ask what can it do for me or me for it. On the other hand, where the audible rather than the visual predominates, people listen to rather than look at things.”³⁴ Likewise, when the Gurensi *tindaana* supplicates the *tingane*, the latter’s “whatness” is irrelevant since *what to do* seems to be the whole point of the interaction: “Now that I have given you those blessings, you also have to reward me...give me a smock to wear.”³⁵ What we have here is a web of personalized relationships between human and natural bodies and forces talking things over, and what they have to say is neither a veiled mental message nor the expression of preformed identities. Rather than having a world of fixed relations and identities, which orature would then have to organize and name—expressing organized sets of what already exists—orature produces the ever-present possibility of the creation and renewal of relationships between people and the land. Drawing from the “spontaneity and liberty of communication inherent in oral transmission—openness to sounds, sights, rhythms, tones, in life and the environment”—could lead to a mindset “characterized by the willingness to experiment with new form,” in short, a willingness to connect.”³⁶

ORATURE AND MINOR LITERATURE

Orature begins with a relation or an encounter, rather than with separate beings in need of a relationship. This prompts us to explore not what orature *is* so much as the more-than-human forces or powers that orature reveals and enunciates. For Deleuze and Guattari, such a modality of language, which treats expression not as picture of the world but as an active formation that produces distinct worlds is a “minor literature” par

excellence. “Minor literature” is a performance, a subversive form of cultural production from within a dominant culture or model, a kind of “becoming a stranger” in one’s own language. Deleuze and Guattari give the example of Kafka’s and Beckett’s writings. Such literatures are always invested in becomings and they make strange the hegemonic signifying regimes:

This is not a situation of bilingualism or multilingualism...this is not how great authors proceed, even though Kafka is a Czech writing in German, and Beckett an Irishman (often) writing in French, and so on....What they do, rather, is invent a *minor use* of the major language within which they express themselves entirely; they *minorize* this language, much as in music, where the minor mode refers to dynamic combinations in perpetual disequilibrium. They are great writers by virtue of this minoritization: they make the language take flight, they send it racing along a witch’s line, ceaselessly placing it in a state of disequilibrium, making it bifurcate and vary in each of its terms, following an incessant modulation...a great writer is always like a foreigner in the language in which he expresses himself, even if this is his native tongue...He is a foreigner in his own language: he does not mix another language with his own language, he carves out a nonpreexistent foreign language *within* his own language. He makes the language itself scream, stutter, stammer, or murmur.³⁷

Minor literature affects a “stutter,” turning a major language against itself. It produces a movement within the major, using the same elements but in a different manner. It is best understood as always in process, as always becoming and generating new forms of expression through the manipulation of those that are already place.³⁸ What makes Kafka such a great writer, for Deleuze and Guattari, is not that he expressed the unrepresented spirit of the Czech people, but that he wrote without recourse to the standard and unified image of “the people.” His writing is peopled not by beings with stable identities but by a multiplicity of voices of what is not given yet, of a “people to come.”³⁹ This is where language is not identified merely with meaning or message but comes closer to the quality of noise, music, or sonorous style: “What interests Kafka is a pure and intense sonorous material that is always connected to *its own abolition*—a deterritorialized

musical sound, a cry that escapes signification, composition, song, words—a sonority that ruptures in order to break away from a chain that is still all too signifying. In sound, intensity alone matters.”⁴⁰ Just as the expression of the immanent plane of ancestral powers is made possible by performance in orature, minor literature renders sonorous forces that cannot be perceived otherwise. It constructs assemblages of metamorphosis and gives voice to minorities—a becoming-animal, a becoming-ancestor, a becoming-woman—that cannot speak or articulate themselves as such.⁴¹

According to Deleuze and Guattari, there are three key characteristics of minor literature that enable its revolutionary and subversive potential: “the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation...minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature.”⁴² I will explore each of these three characteristics in relation to Gurensi and Boosi orature insofar as orature might affect a kind of stuttering of the dominant Euro-American orientations of environmental political theory.

The Deterritorialization of the Book and the Gallery Space

The first characteristic of minor literature, for Deleuze and Guattari, is that in it “language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization. In this sense, Kafka marks the impasse that bars access to writing for the Jews of Prague and turns their literature into something impossible—the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise.”⁴³ Like Kafka’s use of German, African orature can be conceived as a deterritorialized language, appropriate for

strange and minor uses of Euro-American environmental political theory. If writing itself, as the key cultural institution of colonialism and the postcolonial state, requires the Gurensi country and land to become readable like a book, orature ensures the continuous illegibility of vernacular landscapes and forms of authority. It refuses to admit of hierarchies of paper and print over memory and voice, of the world of writing and literacy over the world of sensory and lived experience. For Owusu, Ntuli, and their collaborators at *African Dawn*, orature was “salvaged” as a “weapon” against the ghetto and the margin, assuming a dynamic interplay between margins and centers so that one comes to wonder which was the center and which the margin.⁴⁴

The conversation between orature and minor literature might put environmental political theory’s relationship with alterity in a new light. As minor literature deterritorializes the major, it advances new collaborations and collectivities. Here orature might join forces with what Deleuze and Guattari call philosophy, a practice of concept-invention that involves resistance to the present as it multiplies concepts that summon forth “a new earth, a new people.”⁴⁵ In tandem with philosophy’s more abstract deterritorializations, African orature provides resistance to the present forms of imagined communities and prototypical subjectivities of Euro-American environmental political theory. For example, it reveals the living, the unborn, and the dead (or pythons, baobab trees, and crocodiles) as members of such collectivities. Together, orature and minor literature can extract from the habitual modes of environmental thought the elements of a people who are missing from it: “the people no longer exist, or not yet...the people are missing.”⁴⁶

And yet, these missing people in a sense are already here, though their presence is obscured by the habitual structure of perception and majoritarian productions of subjectivity.⁴⁷ Put simply, to call forth “a new people, a new earth” requires both promoting new social identities and ecological practices and turning to the vibrant multiplicity of those already under way. It renders perceptible to theorists existing practices of sustainability such as the Hawaiian *ahupua'a*, the *kattudel* fisheries in Sri Lanka, the *kebun-talun* systems in West Java, or the *hubche* of the Yucatec Maya in Mexico. The goal is to become more sensitive to permeabilities and crossings that trouble the “Eurocentric” center as a center. Orature makes it clear that some traditions of political thinking make an appearance only when they are told.⁴⁸ Story-telling, oral literatures, songs and proverbs—the prevailing regimes of many indigenous exegetes—have to be negotiated with academic demands for writing and systematization.

The dialogue between orature and minor literature affords an opportunity to decenter sensory hierarchies, and specifically environmental political theory’s commitment to textual and visual forms. We can now interrogate Eurocentrism not only as an intellectual habit but also as a habit of perception. The truth of vision in Western, literate traditions has been often privileged over the evidence of sound, taste, touch, and smell. Once traditions of political thought are no longer prefigured visually, as objects and texts, it becomes possible to think of interplays of voices, utterances, odors, and sounds. Much has been written, in criticism and praise, about the researcher’s gaze. What of the researcher’s ear?⁴⁹ “*Tete ka asom ene Kakyere*”; “ancient things remain in the ear,” says the Akan proverb.⁵⁰ Reconfiguring the theorist’s senses can help her garner new insights. The petition to the land spirits for a good harvest, for example, may modify

extant notions of what counts as labor in an eco-economy, just as the Golib dance may reframe questions of what constitutes political resistance.

In chapter 4 I explored the works of Francis Bacon, Robert Smithson, and Richard Serra as modes of bodily intensification of sensations that enable a reworking of anthropocentric habits of perception. Orature highlights some of the “major” tendencies of this art. It accentuates the extent to which works such as Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* tend to be detached from everyday life and are all too often designed to be consumed as land art. Because orature does not derive its legitimacy from an international art market, it can function as a general “becoming minor” in environmental art: it involves itself in deterritorializing—stuttering—the global language of contemporary art production in its use of the vernacular and specifically non-artistic materials.⁵¹ It produces a movement back and forth between, on the one hand, the canvas and the gallery floor in London and, on the other, the calabash and the village square in the African savanna.

This movement positions orature at the edge of capital’s globalization. It affects a “stutter” in the commodity form of artistic production: “Creative stuttering is what makes language grow from the middle, like grass; it is what makes a language a rhizome instead of a tree, what puts language in a perpetual disequilibrium.”⁵² Like all minor languages, orature is a many-sided rhizome in which no one entrance is more privileged than another: each performance or recounting of a story is a new creation that proliferates new techniques and nurtures a willingness to experiment with new forms. By refusing to privilege any one particular rendition, orature not only challenges the commodification of art but also wards off the emergence of a single hegemonic discourse about collective

history, authority, and belonging. As such it becomes profoundly political. This brings us to the second characteristic of Deleuze and Guattari's definition of minor literature.

“Everything is Political:” Ecological Sovereignty and the “Minor” Order of the Earth

The second characteristic of minor literature, say Deleuze and Guattari, is that it is always political: “its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics.”⁵³ That orature is immediately political becomes evident from the founding story of Zua. The story, along with other pivotal narratives and rituals that define the formation of Gurense political authority, troubles understandings of politics as an exclusively human domain. It acknowledges the constitutive influences of nonhuman forces in political contestations over collective conditions and identities and reveals a set of socio-ecological limits imposed on political power. Such more-than-human forms of authority and power complicate the view that the political function of competing narratives of “first-comers” in Ghana can be identified chiefly with claims of autochthony, entitling or excluding certain groups of people from access to land.⁵⁴

According to Amy Niang in her analysis of rituals as political references in Moogo, such stories present political power as a composite made of components lodged in different offices and orders of sovereignty. Orature reproduces the way this multiplicity lives on beyond the life of any one incumbent, be it a chief, *tindaana* or clan elder. Niang identifies a widespread model of political legitimacy in West African societies that differentiates between the “people of power” associated with the state/power/war and the “people of the earth” associated with belief/rituals/agriculture. There is a balance of power between two “peoples,” whereby priests, soothsayers, and a

host of elders that have a privileged connection to the land mediate communication with ancestors and spirits through rituals, and thus become indispensable for the legitimation of royal and state power. What we have here may be conceived as manifestations of competing sovereignties that sublimate their conflicts rather than clash in violent ways.⁵⁵

This model of distribution of political authority is also visible in the Upper East Region of Ghana, where competing “first-comer” narratives such as the story of the hunter and the warrior negotiate a tenuous balance of power between the chieftaincy and the *tindaana*-ship. Such stories gather and multiply around earthen shrines and powerful features of the land, where successful pleas and supplications are reported, or contact is sought. It may be that orature simultaneously legitimates and wards off the development of centralizing power in society: it iterates the division and correspondences between a minor “earth order” that was never formalized and the power nomenclature of the chieftaincy. The ascendance of the Mamprusi warrior from a young boy at the riverside to a newly enskinned Gurense and Boosi chief subjects political power to the ritual procedures of *tiŋa*.⁵⁶ Each version of the Zua founding story is a rememorialization of the social contract forged through the constitutive encounter between the warrior and the hunter, between “power” and the “earth.” By highlighting the mystical appearance of the python at Azua and the enduring relationship of kinship between the royal clans and the snake, the chieftaincy inscribes migration narratives into a land that welcomes the wanderers and in the process transforms them into history. Royal power here is derived from an ancient power that it supplanted by re-appropriating its essence; in other words, in acknowledging it by its very negation.⁵⁷ This realigning of sovereign orders lies in the continual rehearsal of power and historicity. The production of genealogies and formal

histories of the chieftaincy in Zua seems to be contingent upon such rewritings, negotiations, and reconstructions.

Chiefs have to establish and renew the terms of their alliance with the *tindaanas* and the basis of their legitimacy through various rites and rituals. Such rituals activate the necessary ancestral resources of political legitimacy while appropriating political agency and power from the *tindaama* clans through sacrificial practice and ritual reordering. In Zua every new chief is carried to the *tindaana*'s house where he is made to sit on a sacred stone kept in one of the *byre* (animal room) of the *tindaana*. During the ritual at the *tindaana*'s house the stone is covered with a slimy, okra-like substance known as “*buunto/salum*.” The chief is then stripped naked and two people, a man and a woman, hold the chief by his armpits and then thrust him on the sacred stone. If he slips off his chances of survival are very slim and he will not live long “on the skin.” If, on the other hand, he stays on the stone without slipping off or falling off he will reign for a long period. The ritual is followed by a ceremony, in which the *tindaana* performs sacrifices to Azua for the chief's long life and wealth.⁵⁸

Is it possible that the ritual re-enacts both the overlap and the distinction between state and earth, between a hierarchical system and decentralized autonomy? The Naba acquires sovereignty and the means to rule in the hands of the *Tindaana* through a “confirmation” ritual that seems to “free” him from the constraints of the *tindaana*'s control.⁵⁹ This is, conceivably, a legitimizing process without which the chief has no real control over the administrative basis of his rule. It transposes centralized power onto the ritual sphere while revealing the profound limits and dependence of the human order of sovereignty upon a more fundamental regime of *ecological* or *ancestral* sovereignty

connected to the *tindaana*-ship. Political authority becomes a trial between contesting sovereignties, always subjected to the vicissitudes of the invisible governances of the land gods and the ancestors. In the process, both the chief and the people that he “administrates” may be understood as political subjects of the earth (*tiŋa*) first, and citizens in a quasi-centralized political formation second.

Perhaps, the public display of royal vulnerability by the future chief may also be conceived as the condition set by *tindaanas* and the ancestors for agreeing to relinquish some of their powers. Like the cut-off line near the *tindaana*’s compound that the chief would never dare to cross, such rituals reveal the profound socio-ecological limits imposed upon political power as well as the contingencies of the royal office in Gurensiland. Even the triumphant return to the royal compound does not erase the permanent state of submissiveness of a naked ruler, who remains at the mercy of the ancestors and the “people of the earth.”⁶⁰

Orature as Collective Enunciation of the Living and the Dead

Finally, minor literature is always collective: “in it everything takes on a collective value” and has a collaborative status.⁶¹ It is less the expression of an individual subject than it is the articulation of what Deleuze and Guattari call a “collective assemblage.” “There isn’t a subject; *there are only collective assemblages of enunciation*, and literature expresses these acts insofar as they’re not imposed from without and insofar as they exist only as diabolical powers to come or revolutionary forces to be constructed.”⁶² It shifts voice away from the speaking subject to a collective, pre-subjective saying. It is neither the author nor the character who is speaking: “it is the

writer who becomes a *stutterer in language*. He makes the language as such stutter: an affective and intensive language, and no longer an affectation of the one who speaks.”⁶³

Literature, for Deleuze and Guattari, has its own singular and collective power of affect, one quite distinct from the visual arts discussed in the previous chapter. What is expressed in minor literature is not a specific message or speaker, but a plane of powers that allows for an enunciating that is not reducible to a subject of enunciation. There isn’t a present world and then a representing language, as is told by the myth of representation wherein humans bring a passive earth or “nature” into language.⁶⁴ Rather than treating language as a vehicle for the transmission of messages among pre-formed speakers, minor literature makes perceptible the creative and intensive events and forces that produces speakers, only some of which are human.

However, Deleuze and Guattari provide few specific examples of such collective assemblages and enunciations. Here Gurensi orature—understood as a series of performances and events that produce more-than-human identities, speakers, or alliances—enriches Deleuze and Guattari’s exploration of the collective value of minor literature. In African orature a collectivity might form as an act of story-telling or a village square performance. My observations of how people ordinarily narrated events and stories suggest that they quite happily accepted interventions, digressions, and stories within stories without losing the main narrative thread.⁶⁵ During my discussions of “tradition” in Zua and elsewhere, the chief, the *tindaana* or the household head would summon elders to support and correct him, one of whom may do most of the story-telling. Almost always there were also a number of young men and children in attendance. Some of the younger men offered their own version, which they had learned

elsewhere, especially when a speaker faltered or encountered a moment of hesitation or if it became necessary to resolve an inconsistency. Even within the same household, two versions of a story were rarely identical.⁶⁶ On occasion the *tindaana* poured libation to the community land spirits. During one of my visits to a *tindaana*'s family there was a long discussion about recording the interview. Recording was usually not a problem but the *tindaana*'s son kept insisting that a fowl be sacrificed—"otherwise the voice would not come."



At the Chief's Palace

A conjoint enunciation of the living and the dead emerges through speaking, chanting, or singing. On such occasions I saw how bits and pieces of tradition were being shaped and reshaped into a narrative appropriate for the here and the now. Orature does not aim to express what *is*, as though it had a set of relations and identities to repeat or reproduce. It seems to produce a Gurensi and Boosi identity that is always provisional, always in the process of creation. Each new rendering in Gurensi and Boosi orature

transforms what it means to be “Gurensi” or “Boosi.” A minor literature does not become major when it collects enough examples. On the contrary, the more renderings and versions there are out there, the more identities are added. If orature can be identified as “traditional” it is not because it furnishes an authentic representation of some origin. It is because it seems to produce what Deleuze and Guattari call a “territory,” in which being Gurensi or Boosi is conceived as process of becoming and negotiation between the living and the dead, incorporating images from without through its own modality of work.⁶⁷

The orature regarding the beginning of the Boosi at Azua does not rely on the python or the pile of stones to symbolize “who they are.” It is only in actually gathering around the *tingane* or interacting with the python that people become “Boosi.” The investments and interactions between people and the environment produce a collective assemblage.⁶⁸ This assemblage is a “territorial” investment insofar as it connects the social body of the village to the earthen bodies of the ancestors—not an underlying essence, which the investment then represents. Major literature repeats forms of the past and subjugates itself to a preexisting identity that all those forms express.⁶⁹ Orature and minor literature, on the other hand, produce possibilities for new speakers and collaborations. And only some of these speakers are human or alive.

¹ Gurensi Chief, interview by Anatoli Ignatov, September 20, 2012.

² Gurensi *Tindaana*, interview by Anatoli Ignatov, Jacqueline Ignatova and Christopher Azaare, October 4, 2012.

³ Gurensi Chief, interview by Anatoli Ignatov and Jacqueline Ignatova, December 13, 2012.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See also Chapters 4 and 5 of Christopher Azaare, *A History of the Bongo District* (forthcoming).

⁶ Carola Lentz, *Land, Mobility and Belonging in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 5.

⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁸ Elizabeth Povinelli, “Do Rocks Listen? The Cultural Politics of Apprehending Australian Aboriginal Labor” *American Anthropologist* 97, no. 3 (September 1995): 506-7, 514.

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- ⁹ Chris Azaare, interview by Anatoli Ignatov and Jacqueline Ignatova, Gowrie, March 6, 2013.
- ¹⁰ Lentz, *Land, Mobility and Belonging in West Africa*, 8.
- ¹¹ These divisions can be also seen at work in contemporary Ghanaian politics.
- ¹² Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 111.
- ¹³ Kwesi Owusu, ed. *Storms of the Heart* (London: Camden Press, 1988), 2; See also Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams*, 113-4.
- ¹⁴ Pitika Ntuli, "Orature: A Self Portrait," in *Storms of the Heart*, ed. Kwesi Owusu (London: Camden Press, 1988), 214.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ntuli, "Orature: A Self Portrait," 215.
- ¹⁷ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams*, 115.
- ¹⁸ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing* (New York: Columbia, 2012), 77.
- ¹⁹ Ibid, 15.
- ²⁰ See chapter 5 of Christopher Azaare, *A History of the Bongo District*, forthcoming.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Gurensi Tindaana, interview by Anatoli Ignatov and Chris Azaare, December 14, 2012.
- ²³ Gurensi Chief, interview by Anatoli Ignatov, September 20, 2012. Like the Gurensi commons explored in chapter 2, these totemic relationships and accounts of mutual cooperation between humans and nonhumans have to be situated within the patriarchal nature of actual gender practices within the Gurensi system of patrilineal descent and primogeniture. See chapter 2, note 59.
- ²⁴ This is not to say that the distinction between lived and philosophical thought is not relevant to the concerns of Western political thought. "Performance" or "performativity" is a very present theme even in Euro-American contemporary theory. For instance, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
- ²⁵ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Globalectics*, 80-81. See also Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams*, 109-10.
- ²⁶ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams*, 110.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 122.
- ²⁹ Christopher A. Azaare, *Gurensi Traditional Religion: Rituals in Breaches of Taboos, Initiations* (October 1999, Unpublished manuscript), 183-5.
- ³⁰ Amy Niang, "Reviving the Dormant Divine: Rituals as Political References in Moogo," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 28, no.1 (2014): 78.
- ³¹ Niang, "Reviving the Dormant Divine," 79.
- ³² Michael Singleton, "Speaking to the Ancestors: Religion as Interlocutory Interaction" *Anthropos* 104 (2009): 314, 319.
- ³³ Ibid., 326-7.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 326.
- ³⁵ Gurensi Chief and Elders, interview by Anatoli Ignatov, Jacqueline Ignatova and Christopher Azaare, December 12, 2012. Consider also the explanation provided by another chief when I asked him what counts most in people's relations with the ancestors: "the trees provide them with materials for roofing... they give them fruits. And then the animals – they also do some work for them so that's a part of people's identification with them" (Gurensi Chief, interview by Anatoli Ignatov and Chris Azaare, September 21, 2012).
- ³⁶ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Globalectics*, 73. Here orature might be usefully brought into contact with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "expression." This concept refers to a style of thinking that makes perceptible the powers of life to unfold itself differently. Deleuze draws on Spinoza's idea of expression to advance a philosophy that is active and practical: it expands our experience of the world as already differentiated into entities by focusing instead upon the expressive power which produces those separate bodies (Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* [London: Routledge, 2002], 78). Such a philosophy rejects the possibility of a

self-present world that precedes expression. Orature's commitment to expression becomes evident in the elders' interest in speaking to the land gods whose "whatness" escapes signification and representation. The ancestors are the land's expression, nature's power to act. The world is not an object to be known, observed, or represented; it is, rather, a dynamic plane of powers and forces to unfold and express different potentials and relations of life (Claire Colebrook, "Expression," in *The Deleuze Dictionary*, ed. Adrian Parr [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005], 93-94).

³⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 109-10.

³⁸ Simon O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought beyond Representation* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 73.

³⁹ Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, 104.

⁴⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 6.

⁴¹ "What does music deal with, what is the content indissociable from sound expression? It is hard to say, but it is something: a child dies, a child plays, a woman is born, a woman dies, a bird arrives, a bird flies off. We wish to say that these are not accidental themes in music (even if it is possible to multiply examples), much less imitative exercises; they are something essential. Why a child, a woman, a bird? It is because musical expression is inseparable from a becoming-woman, a becoming-child, a becoming-animal that constitute its content. Why does the child die, or the bird fall as though pierced by an arrow? Because of the 'danger' inherent in any line that escapes, in any line of flight or creative deterritorialization: the danger of veering toward destruction, toward abolition" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 299); See also Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 57-58.

⁴² Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 18.

⁴³ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 16.

⁴⁴ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams*, 115. According to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, orature continues to subvert the authority of the literary colonizer insofar as changes in language (such as new words, expressions, borrowings) occur mostly at the level of orality long before they are conserved in writing. The literary not only feeds off the living tradition of the oral, but some of the great periods of Western philosophy and literature can be understood as times when writers were closer to the oral (e.g. the Greeks, Shakespeare, and Pushkin) (108-9).

⁴⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 99; See also O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari*, 74.

⁴⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 216. In this regard, Deleuze and Guattari remind us that "When we say majority, we are referring not to a greater relative quantity but to the determination of a state or standard in relation to which larger quantities, as well as the smallest, can be said to be minoritarian: white-man, adult-male, etc." (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 291).

⁴⁷ Deleuze and Guattari point instead to how every individual is itself also a multiplicity: "it is I who am first of all a people, the people of my atoms" (Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 220).

⁴⁸ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

⁴⁹ James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, eds. James Clifford and George Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 11-12.

⁵⁰ Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, xi.

⁵¹ O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari*, 73.

⁵² Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 111.

⁵³ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 17.

⁵⁴ There has been a contemporary proliferation of such claims of autochthony—i.e. "born from the soil"—that seek to establish an irrefutable, primordial right to belonging and that have become employed in politically charged attempts to exclude outsiders from access to land, citizenship and resources. For

instance, see Peter Geschiere, *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁵⁵ Niang, "Reviving the Dormant Divine," 83, 86.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 78.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 82.

⁵⁸ For a comprehensive account of the various rituals and rites associated with the enskinment of Bongo chiefs, see chapter 9 of Christopher Azaare's *A History of the Bongo District* (forthcoming).

⁵⁹ Niang, "Reviving the Dormant Divine," 80.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 81.

⁶¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 17.

⁶² Ibid., 18.

⁶³ Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 107.

⁶⁴ Here I build on Claire Colebrook's instructive account of the literary affect produced by minor literature. See Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, 103-23.

⁶⁵ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1986), 76.

⁶⁶ My fieldwork experiences are corroborated by much anthropological work in Northern Ghana. For two notable examples see Wyatt Macgaffey, *Chiefs, Priests, and Praise-Singers: History, Politics, and Land Ownership in Northern Ghana* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 49 and Carola Lentz, *Land, Mobility and Belonging in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

⁶⁷ "the territory, and the functions performed within it, are products of territorialization. Territorialization is an act of rhythm that has become expressive, or of milieu components that have become qualitative" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 315)

⁶⁸ Ibid., 108.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 122.

Conclusion

This dissertation has attempted to rethink and rework aspects of Euro-American environmental thought through ethnographic encounters with selected African ecological practices and knowledges. What happens when environmental political theory travels across cultural boundaries? What can these travels tell us about the practice of theorizing itself—its limits, its shifting horizons, and its relations to lived experience? The name “theory” comes from the Greek *theoria*, defined as to “see the world” or to be a “spectator.” Yet, like Kant, the preeminent thinker of universalism who never left Königsberg, theory’s travels do not always entail actual departures from familiar categories and institutions. Farah Godrej has shown, for example, how the Eurocentric habits of political theory emerged and became consolidated, in part, through imperial travel: the insights and influences of non-Europe were disavowed in order to reinforce Europe’s own sense of exceptionalism.¹ Such practices of power in the production of political theory often become renewed when scholars and environmentalists export majoritarian Euro-American notions of the environment to understand unfamiliar modes of ecological thought.

The global environmental movement has raised a series of pressing questions about the relationship between cultural priorities, sustainability, land use practices, and social identities. In the US and Europe many of these questions have emerged from *below*, from grassroots movements and concerns. However, when these ideas and practices travel to new contexts such as Northern Ghana they often appear as coming from *above*. By combining a minor tradition of political theory with ethnographic research, I seek to transform such modes of travel of ideas into a two-way conversation

that inspires co-learning. When theorists are called upon to be part-ethnographers, non-Western traditions can be approached not as objects of analysis or “case studies,” but as worlds of intellectual production.

A primary concern of the project has been to highlight the unequal status of different modes of knowledge production concerning the relationship between human subjectivities and a variety of non-human modes of being. Such inequalities profoundly affect the ways in which the global environmental crisis has come to be understood and addressed. Here I again concur with Godrej that the West/Non-West division remains pertinent insofar as it reveals how knowledge production and transmission continue to be plagued by radical power disparities. My aim is to question the Eurocentric tendencies of environmental political theory, understood as a posture towards knowledge that locates subjectivity and the agency to know in the West, while treating other ways of life and other modalities of political thought (e.g. African orature) as objects to be studied.² The idea is not merely to advance the case for taking seriously indigenous ecological thought. I also seek to attest to neglected potentials and lived practices of environmentalism that characterize the collective conditions of multitudes—East and West, North and South—in the Anthropocene.

Thus I aim to reposition political theory with respect to its intellectual “resources” and “objects” of study. The engagement between the Gurensi earth priest and Friedrich Nietzsche, I argue, can be conceived as an exchange between partners that remains as relevant to the practice of political theory as is the engagement between the Confucian tradition and Western liberalism. By reducing the gap between theory and everyday experience, Euro-American theorists and Ghanaian elders together might help to

transform practices of transcultural learning and exchange. They might enrich our thinking about the relationship between political theory and alterity. Once alterity is no longer encountered as “an object,” exchange and co-learning can occur. “Informants” become co-authors and co-producers. As theory’s debts to plural production and textual collaboration become more apparent, one begins to wonder whether the challenge to Western notions of subjectivity also entails a shift towards new modes of textual production that are in practice authored by more than one person in more than one place.

Such models of transcultural learning and borrowing apply both to research and teaching. It becomes essential to include the works and oral histories of African writers and elders in our pedagogical portfolios, rather than rely on the written work of Western academics alone, as is still common practice in many political theory and international studies courses. My hope is that by exploring voices commonly excluded from the classroom, political discourse, and intellectual study, both scholars and students will be encouraged to think more deeply about their own political, social, and economic positions and to seek understanding across historical and geographical distance.

As already suggested, one of the main structural impediments to addressing contemporary ecological problems remains the unsustainable infrastructure of global consumption and the social production of human wants. This infrastructure is intertwined with structures of anthropocentric perception that organize much of the liberal consensus of environmental political theory. This includes perceptions of human bodies as autonomous rights-bearers and self-enclosed biological entities that can be variously possessed or controlled, and notions of the earth as a set of “economic resources” or as a

pliable material context for human designs and practices. If a theorist comes to a new tradition of thought as a learner/imitator rather than an expert, and if she tries on various positionalities and identities, she may come both to acknowledge and to deepen the ways in which her subjectivity is neither “attached solely to one tradition, nor entirely an outsider to any.”³ This capacity to inhabit multiple positionalities—theorist, ethnographer, Westerner, middle-class political activist, environmentalist—may decenter such Eurocentric perceptions of the human, placing them in a series of transformative relationships to previously neglected traditions of ecological thought.

For instance, chapter 3 has tried to bring certain elements of African animism to move and illuminate Nietzsche’s perspectivism. Such artistry helps to foster a style of thinking and sensing that makes more perceptible an ongoing web of more-than-human interactions and communication. In the process of shifting back and forth between different perspectives and identities, the experience of what it means to be human may also shift. A self-possessed individual may become alert to the *dividual* circulating in it that is composite, permeable, and constituted by perspectives and interpretations that originate outside or below the self.⁴ Thoreau’s hoeing beans not only affords temporary suspension of subject-object relationships in favor of a kindredship of more-than-human economy-makers, but also works upon the tacit practices of perception that help to organize selves. Zarathustra’s cultivation of gift-giving virtue enables him to assume the perspective of the sun, which is always turned outwards and reaching out to the other. It allows him to amplify “the inflow,” to digest it and to allow the outflow to be richer. The earth priest’s libation and supplication to the *tingane* (earth gods) transforms him into a human mouthpiece for the expressivity of the land and the ancestors. In all three cases,

the human body is experienced as a lively constellation of layered communities and vital earthen materials dependent for its richness upon larger assemblages of humans and nonhumans. Mind and body become extended into socio-ecological networks that include not only the earth, plants, animals, and minerals but also tools, machines, and cultural artifacts.

This is not to suggest that all environmental political theorists should conduct fieldwork or employ the ethnographic method. Or that all environmentalists should travel to a village in Africa or the Amazon to solicit the expertise of an earth priest or a shaman. Some of us may decide instead to engage in experimental artistic work—what I have called *practices of eco-sensation*—that recrafts and stretches anthropocentric habits of perception and judgment. The matter- and landscape installations of Richard Serra and Robert Smithson, or the paintings of Francis Bacon may also produce pro-ecological effects on many human bodies in this respect. They might elicit and intensify sensations that enhance our awareness of the various interdependencies between human subjectivities and earthly forces and processes. Such tactics of self-artistry may prime us to experiment with some of the other role performances that constitute us as political, social, and ecological beings.

Here what I have in mind is a variety of micro-experimentation practices that work on several socio-cultural registers at once, informed by William Connolly's idea of "role experimentation." Connolly enlists this idea to augment the organized hierarchy of roles that connects individuals, constituencies, and institutions in the matrix of contemporary neoliberalism:

large-scale cultural investments in a set of role expectations tend to express and support the priorities of an established regime, while large-scale experimentations

can both make a difference on their own *and help to set preconditions for constituency participation in more robust political movements*...Role experimentation can disrupt and redirect the flow of authority, habit, institutional regularity, and future projection. In can encourage others to look more closely at their own performances in this or that domain. Such experiments can also set the stage for more adventurous and larger scale actions.⁵

According to Connolly, a series of minor role experiments might accumulate into pronounced changes in institutional designs and practices, forging new connections across multiple constituencies engaging in similar experiments. In the domain of ecopolitics, such experiments include: active support of farm-to-table restaurants, the slow food movement, and stores that offer food based upon sustainable processes; buying a hybrid and joining a car-sharing urban collective; pressing neighborhood associations and workplaces to switch to solar panels and install them themselves; withdrawing from aggressive investments that presuppose unsustainable growth patterns or/and undermine the collective future; joining repair clubs to cut back on waste and increase the longevity of appliances, furniture, and vehicles; altering personal patterns of film and artistic exhibits attended to stretch one's habitual powers of perception and to challenge unconscious American assumptions about world entitlement, etc.⁶

As such experiments accumulate, they may not only become more refined and entrenched but also might encourage us to reach out to larger constituencies, which are not exclusively human. We may now become more alert to our roles as citizens in biotic communities where animals, plants, and mountains also are granted ethical consideration and rights, and where biodiversity preservation is nurtured and prioritized. Or, rather, we may begin to re-experience ourselves as earth-bound bodies in an eco-economy, in which crocodiles, baobab trees, and ponds are also enmeshed in a web of role performances as economic actors and co-producers of the "gross necessities of life." Such connections

may provide us with a sense of wealth, enrichment, and belonging that exceeds the rewards and incentives provided by neoliberal markets, as they did for Thoreau, Zarathustra, and the African elder. Role experimentation within and across pluralist assemblages is revealed as a two-way street. As parents, colleagues, lovers, friends, and teachers, we begin to educate others, at home and in the classroom, about the value of combining philosophy with the lived experience of biodiversity and interconnectedness. As students, sons and daughters, learners/imitators, and ecological citizens in a more-than-human polity we begin to listen more attentively to the messages of the world and to what the earth, the ancestors, the animals, and the plants require from us.

A truly sustainable economy thus calls into question the boundary between the human and nonhuman world and the unspoken assumption that nonhumans have no agency and do not produce socio-economic effects. This anthropocentric bias is expressed in the ideas that nature is a set of “economic resources,” that matter is pliable, and that only the human has agency of any kind. An emphasis on more-than-human assemblages allows us to see the intra-actions between the porous bodies that compose the economy and the ways in which the economy is continuously generated and regenerated through these encounters. Such collections of communities are complex assemblages and communities of communities, of which humans are a part and on which human survival depends.

According to J.K. Gibson-Graham and Gerda Roelvink, these communities constitute a new “econo-sociality” that allows us “to trace how attending to the *needs* of the more than human reallocates *surplus*, shifts patterns of *consumption*, and replenishes

a *commons*.”⁷ Human needs are intertwined with the needs of animals, plants, soils, and water sources; concerns about the exploitative interdependence between producers and non-producers are linked to a concern for the unaccounted-for exploitation of the nonhuman world.⁸ From this ecological perspective, an eco-economy emerges as a “space of negotiated interdependence rather than a growth machine.”⁹ Divisions between consumption and production, between the productive and reproductive domain, become more fluid.

The project is to re-think economy and politics as crucial dimensions of ethical self-formation. The economization of life with all its implications (cultural, social, ecological, and political) is subjecting its participants to invisible and hidden processes of normalization and systems of control. Drawing on Connolly’s reflections on role experimentation, the task of political resistance is no longer merely a question of taking power and institutional capture but also of *making* power, of augmenting deeply entrenched role performances and habits of perception. Here Connolly agrees with Foucault that the objective is “not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are” and to redefine our relationship to the present: “We have to promote new forms of identity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries.”¹⁰ Contemporary environmentalism, then, can be understood as a search for resonating modes of counterpower in the present. It becomes a process of finding creative ways to redistribute our lives across multiple arrangements of human and thing-power and to shatter the normalizing effects of neoliberal capitalism.

In this respect, the mutuality of the encounters between Western and African ecological thought staged in this dissertation might diversify the resources available in

the search for such alternatives. The conversations between Thoreau, Nietzsche, and the earth priest may highlight complex tissues of practices of living *with* the land that are continually being adapted to changing political and ecological circumstances. They might help us register the affectivity and productivity of the land in its relations with humans. As I have suggested, in the Gurensi *tiŋa* there is no room for binary distinctions such as nature/culture, domesticated/wild, and subject/object. *Tiŋa* is a complex assemblage of force-fields of spiritual, ecological, and political power, distributed along a continuum of interactions between *tindaanas*, chiefs, clan elders, spirits and earth gods. Unlike a resource frontier that implies an inert landscape ready to be dismembered by competing human claims, landscapes like *tiŋa* are particularly active: they “are simultaneously natural and social, and they shift and turn in the interplay of human and nonhuman practices.”¹¹ If property in Ghana is best understood as a social process of negotiated interdependence, the land plays a vital part in such negotiations.¹²

Here the exchange between Zarathustra and the earth priest in Chapter 3 becomes particularly instructive: it brings to light a web of existing human-environment interactions as relations of agonistic co-operation, and not competition. Chapter 5, in turn, exposes the political function of such agonism by examining Gurensi earth shrines (*tingana*) as sites of political contestation between competing forms of sovereignty and authority. It shows that sacred groves can be understood as microcosms of two complementary forces of state and earth, which refer to an imported hierarchical system of chieftaincy and a decentralized regime of *ecological* sovereignty associated with the earth custody. Such transcultural revisions of economy and politics figure social identities and political institutions as processes that are (re)produced and reinvented every day

through the conjoint action of human and more-than-human participants. They enable us to reclaim economy and politics as sites of everyday ethical practices, enacting new *body-economies* and new *econo-socialities* at the core of which is the negotiation of interdependence. Localities such as Northern Ghana that are commonly defined in terms of deficiency now can be re-experienced as sites of surplus possibility where alternative pathways to shaping political economy are continually opening up.¹³

My goal has been to discuss under-recognized aspects of global environmentalism and to perceive change as a socio-ecological process that starts horizontally, flowing out of and into the earth and back into the human body. Such change involves the recovery of a freedom to participate in the ecological regeneration of the earth, as we are mobilized to act through intra-actions with other bodies of seeds, animals, mountains, and water. Such a notion of freedom exceeds the entrepreneurial freedom of the liberal individual to compete in a marketplace. It aims instead to contribute to the struggle for a better life of the whole biotic community through macropolitical and micropolitical experiments. Macropolitical refers to organized and institutional forms of participation, mobilizing vernacular and eco-egalitarian ways of interaction and leadership. Micropolitical refers to techniques of existence that refashion political sensibilities, role performances, and constituency subjectivities in the direction of interconnectedness, reciprocity, receptivity, redistribution, and community. Our identities are inevitably laden with power relations and bound to more-than-human assemblages. The current “successes” of this world, including our formation as ecological and political beings, bind us to the dominant imaginaries of capitalist order. The critical task becomes to cultivate nonconformist sensibilities and redefine each subject’s relation to herself and her milieu, so that this

relation is based on the affirmation of the fecundity and diversity of earthly existence. To avoid submission to the authority of consumption-crazed and human-centered thinking means to deliberately and overtly fail to reproduce a model of this authority within oneself or to allow it define our connections to the larger communities of animals, plants, minerals, and the earth.

¹ Farah Godrej, *Cosmopolitan Political Thought: Method, Practice, Discipline* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 19. This is not to deny, however, that importing one's own categories of understanding is to some extent necessary and inevitable.

² Godrej, *Cosmopolitan Political Thought*, 13-14.

³ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴ In her ethnography of Highland New Guinea society Marilyn Strathern describes how Melanesian notions of personhood can be constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that compose them. See Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). For a discussion of dividual personhood in India and Melanesia in relation to human uses of material culture see Chris Fowler, *The Archaeology of Personhood: An Anthropological Approach* (London: Routledge, 2004).

⁵ William E. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 184-5.

⁶ Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 187.

⁷ J.K. Gibson-Graham and Gerda Roelvink, "An Economic Ethics for the Anthropocene" *Antipode* 41: S1 (January 2010): 335. Gibson-Graham and Roelvink map out experimental community economies of rural and outback Australia such as Lyndfield Park, Aboriginal methods of farming, and Natural Sequence Farming that provide new ways of being with the land and of living with earth others in the Anthropocene: "All these collectives are constituting a new econo-sociality in which the *needs* of the more than human are valued and prioritized. *Surplus* is directed toward more-than-human needs, *consumption* habits are modified with respect to these needs, and the *commons* shared by all species is replenished and renewed" (341-2).

⁸ Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, "An Economic Ethics for the Anthropocene," 334.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 335.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8:4 (1982): 785.

¹¹ Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 29.

¹² According to Sara Berry, property among the Ashanti of Ghana is better understood as a social process and a network of social relations that is continually negotiated and renegotiated by groups of people rather than autonomous individuals (Sara Berry, *Chiefs Know Their Boundaries: Essays on Property, Power, and the Past in Asante, 1896-1996* [Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001], xxii). The economization of land might fuel people's efforts to apply old rules to new contexts or to secure access through investment in social relationships without cutting themselves off from customary channels of support. Berry's insights can be applied to Northern Ghana, where property rights do not seem to have become either effectively privatized or so exclusive that family livelihoods are left at the mercy of the market economy alone. This does not mean that concentration has not occurred through "land market" reforms, decades of state and colonial appropriation, and changes in traditional avenues of access. However, as an increasing number of people acquire additional rights and claims proliferate through inheritance, what is being concentrated is often not land acquisition and ownership in the sense of freehold tenure but "control over different bundles of rights in land." For instance, "a particular parcel of land may be subject to both concentration and fragmentation at the same time" as different bundles might be held and exercised by different groups of

people (Sara Berry, "Concentration without Privatization? Some Consequences of Changing Patterns of Rural Land Control in Africa" in *Land and Society in Contemporary Africa*, eds. R.E. Downs and S.P. Reyna [Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1988], 53). This adds a new layer to a monad of existing practices, complicating rather homogenizing lines of authority, exclusion, and legitimacy. Ownership in Northern Ghana is never absolute: it is a historically contingent set of practices "that always leave a greater or smaller set of residual property rights with other agencies than the 'owner.'" The "owner" is an approximation that is always subject to friction and negotiation (Lund, *Local Politics and the Dynamics of Property in Africa*, 49).

¹³ Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, "An Economic Ethics for the Anthropocene," 329-30.

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- , "Culture: The Universal Animal." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Masterclass Series 1 (2012): 83-103.
- , "Nature: The World as Affect and Perspective." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Masterclass Series 1 (2012): 105-29.
- , "Supernature: Under the Gaze of the Other." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Masterclass Series 1 (2012): 131-53.
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EDUCATION

Ph.D., Political Science, Johns Hopkins University, July 2014

B.A., Political Science (*Summa Cum Laude*), San Francisco State University,
January 2007

A.A. Political Science, A.A. Sociology, A.A. Anthropology, Contra Costa
College, May 2004

English and American Studies, Sofia University, 1997-2001

RESEARCH INTERESTS

Environmental political theory
Comparative political theory
African political thought
History of political thought
Development and globalization studies
International political economy

PUBLICATIONS

Articles and Book Chapters

“Thoreau Goes to Ghana: On the Wild and the Tingane” in *Common Good(s): Economy, Ecology, Political Theology*, ed. Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre and Catherine Keller. New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming.

“Practices of Eco-sensation: Opening Doors of Perception to the Nonhuman.” *Theory and Event* 14, no. 2 (June 2011).

Book Reviews and Essays

Review of *Cosmopolitan Political Thought: Method, Practice, Discipline* by Farah Godrej. *Theory and Event* 17, no.1 (March 2014).

Review of *War, Commerce, and International Law* by James Thuo Gathii. *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 6, no. 3 (October 2010), pp. 461-463.

“The Re-turn to the Other: In Search of New Ontologies of International Relations.” Review essay of *The Concept of the Political* by Carl Schmitt, *Beyond Security, Ethics and Violence: War against the Other* by Anthony Burke and *The Subject of Coexistence: Otherness in International Relations* by Louiza Odysseos. *borderlands* 8, no. 2, 2009.

Work in Progress

Editor, *A History of the Bongo District* by Christopher Azaare Anabila (in collaboration with Bon-Naba Baba Salifu Alemeyarum, paramount chief of Bongo), forthcoming 2015.

TEACHING

Instructor, Johns Hopkins University, Department of Political Science
Courses taught:

- a) The Politics of Plants and Animals, Summer 2010
- b) Global Environmental Politics, Spring 2011, Spring 2012
- c) Globalization and Development: The Clash of Civilizations or a New World Order?, Summer 2011, Summer 2014
- d) Ecologies of the Good Life: Politics for a More-Than-Human World, Spring 2013
- e) Third World, Environment, and Development, Spring 2014

Guest Lecturer, Johns Hopkins University
Lectures:

- a) “Identity\Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox.” The Politics of Good and Evil, November 3, 2008
- b) “No Logo.” Globalization and Culture, April 21, 2010
- c) “Driving as a Political Act: The Politics of Deep Pluralism in Salem’s *A Drive to Israel*.” The Politics of Travel in the Middle East, April 22, 2010
- d) “Fortuna and Virtù: How to Practice Politics as Art?” Classics of Political Thought: Virtue, Labor, and Power, February 28, 2011
- e) “Augustine of Hippo: Phaedrus to Confessions.” Political Persuasion (Classics of Political Thought I), September 14, 2011
- f) “Peace by Peaceful Means” and “Shadow Networks.” Introduction to International Studies, September 19-21, 2011
- g) “Have a Break: From Food as Waste to Eating as Economy.” U.S. Environmental Policy: theory, history, politics, & law, March 25, 2013

h) "Environmental Justice and the Global Distancing of Waste." Introduction to Sustainability, March 11, 2014

Teaching assistant, Johns Hopkins University, Department of Political Science, 2007-2010

Courses taught:

- a) The Politics of Good and Evil, (Prof. Connolly), Fall 2008
- b) Classics of Political Thought, (Prof. Bennett), Spring 2009, Fall 2011
- c) Introduction to International Law, (Prof. Grovogui), Fall 2009
- d) Introduction to International Studies, (Prof. Grovogui), Fall 2010

Teaching assistant, San Francisco State University, Department of Political Science, 2006

Courses taught:

Introduction to Political Theory, (Prof. Martel), Spring 2006

CONFERENCE PAPERS/TALKS

The "Door of No Return:" Unequal Geographies of Remembrance and Enslavement in Ghana. American Political Science Association, August 2014

How Land Speaks: Orature and Ecological Change. International Workshop on Participatory Democracy's Non-Human and Non-Living "Others," The Public Science Project, CUNY, New York, May 2014

The Earth as a Gift-Giving Ancestor: Nietzsche's Perspectivism and African Animism. Western Political Science Association, Seattle, April 2014

The Skin and the Stool: Re-Crafting Histories of Belonging in Northern Ghana. International Studies Association, Toronto, March 2014

Unlikely Crossings: Fashion, Spirits, and the Development Imaginary. International Studies Association, Toronto, March 2014

The Skin and the Stool: Re-Crafting Histories of Belonging in Northern Ghana. International Studies Association Northeast, Providence, November 2013

Thoreau Goes to Ghana: On the Wild and the Tingane, African Seminar, Department of History, Johns Hopkins University, April 19, 2013

Economy as Ecology: Contesting Imaginaries of Land and Property in Ghana. International Studies Association, San Francisco, April 2013

Thoreau Goes to Ghana: On the Wild and the Tingane. Western Political Science Association, Hollywood, March 2013

“The Earth is like a Skin:” Earth Priests, Sacred Groves and African Eco-Theologies. Theological Colloquium, Drew Theological School, Madison, February 2013

Uncharted Territories of International Existence: Bodies, Forces, Earthworks. International Studies Association, San Diego, April 2012

Thoreau’s Economy: The Enchantment of Simple Living. Western Political Science Association, Portland, March 2012

The Arts of Ecopolitics: Bodies, Forces, Earthworks, African Seminar, Department of History, Johns Hopkins University, October 28, 2011

Three Ecologies of Consumption, American Political Science Association, Seattle, September 2011

Three Ecologies of Consumption: Practicing the Economy Differently, Western Political Science Association, San Antonio, April 2011

Time and the Postcolony: Exiting the “Historical Waiting Room” of Western Order and Institutions, International Studies Association, Montreal, March 2011

Rethinking Market Capitalism: Postdevelopment Alternatives to Neoliberal Imaginaries, International Studies Association, Montreal, March 2011

Practices of Eco-sensation: Opening Doors of Perception to the Nonhuman, Western Political Science Association, San Francisco, April 2010

FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS

Dean’s Prize Freshman Seminar Fellowship, Johns Hopkins University, Fall 2014, (declined)

Dean’s Teaching Fellowship, Johns Hopkins University, Spring 2013

James Hart Fellowship, Johns Hopkins University, 2012-2013

SSRC International Dissertation Research Fellowship (IDRF) Finalist, 2012-2013

Prize Fellowship for International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Spring 2011, Spring 2012

Warren B. Hunting Fellowship, Johns Hopkins University, 2009-2010

Excellence in Teaching Award Nominee, Johns Hopkins University, Fall 2008

Dean's List, San Francisco State University, College of Behavioral and Social Sciences, Fall 2004, Spring 2005, Spring 2006

National Collegiate Social Science Award Nominee, Spring 2003

FIELDWORK

Ethnographic research in Upper East Region and Northern Region, Ghana,
December 2011 – January 2012 and July 2012 - January 2013

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research, Syracuse University, June 13-24, 2011

Member, American Political Science Association

Member, New Political Science Section; Section on Qualitative and Multi-method Research, APSA

Member, Western Political Science Association

Member, International Studies Association

Member, African Studies Association

Member, Ghana Studies Association

ACADEMIC SERVICE

Co-organizer of Graduate Student Colloquium, Department of Political Science, Johns Hopkins University, August 2008 – May 2009

Member of Contra Costa College Honors Society, October 2003 – May 2004

Member of Contra Costa College Sociology Club, December 2002 – December 2003

Member of the Executive Committee of the Bulgarian Assembly of Student Councils, November 1999 – May 2001

Student representative of the Department of Classical and New Language, Sofia University Academic Council, November 1999 – May 2001

LANGUAGE SKILLS

Fluent in English and Bulgarian; working knowledge of Gurene, Dagbani,
Russian